

Bokuto Uno

ILLUSTRATION BY

Ruria Miyuki

IX

Reign
SEVEN
of the
SPELLBLADES





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Reign
of the
SEVEN
SPELL BLADES



Oliver Horn

Ursule Valois

*"The dance
has only just
begun. Are
you fit to
serve as my
partner?"*

Nanao Hibiya

Yuri Leik





"I'll lead. Crush 'em
before he transforms."

Joseph Albright

"Noted."

Richard Andrews

"Shush. I
was minding
the time."

Stacy Cornwallis

"...That was
close, Stace."

Fay Willock



For his next move, Andrews had innumerable options. Oliver had just as many ways to respond.

Yet, each cast practicality aside, surging forward, Blade clashed against blade, the metallic *clang* ringing out joy on behalf of their wielders.



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Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Bokuto Uno

Reign of the SEVEN SPELLBLADES



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New York

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Bokuto Uno

Translation by Andrew Cunningham
Cover art by Ruria Miyuki

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Characters

Reign of the Seven

Third-Years



Oliver Horn

The story's protagonist. Jack-of-all-trades, master of none. Swore revenge on the seven instructors who killed his mother.



Nanao Hibiya

A samurai girl from Asia. Believes that Oliver is her destined sword partner.



Katie Aalto

A girl from Farnland, a nation belonging to the Union. Has a soft spot for the civil rights of demi-humans.



Guy Greenwood

A boy from a family of magical farmers. Honest and friendly. Has a knack for magical flora.



Pete Reston

A studious boy born to nonmagicals. Capable of switching between male and female bodies.



Michela McFarlane

Elder daughter of the prolific McFarlane family. A master of the pen and sword, she looks out for her friends.



Tullio Rossi

A lone wolf who taught himself the sword by ignoring the fundamentals. Determined to beat Oliver in a rematch.



Yuri Leik

A transfer student. What he lacks in sense, he makes up for in boundless curiosity. Chummy with everyone.



Richard Andrews

A proud youth from a prestigious family. Recognizes Oliver's and Nanao's talents and considers them worthy rivals.



Joseph Albright

Heir to the Albright warrior clan. Teamed up with Andrews and Rossi to hit back at Oliver and company.

Third-Years



Stacy Cornwallis

Michela's paternal half sister. Stubborn and headstrong, she has a competitive streak where Chela is concerned.



Fay Willock

Has served Stacy since they were kids and is dedicated to her. Half-human, half-werewolf.



Ursule Valois

Her team has advanced in the combat league. Has it out for Oliver's squad for reasons unknown.



Tim Linton

Small and cute yet short-tempered and aggressive. Known and feared as the Toxic Goner.

Seventh-Years



Alvin Godfrey

Student council president. Nicknamed Purgatory by his peers. Boasts incredible firepower.



Leoncio Echevalria

Leader of the previous student council's faction. Once hated Godfrey for the presidency and received burns to the right side of his face, which he refuses to heal.

Instructors



Demitrio Aristides

Astronomy instructor. Driven to protect the world from tir incursions.



Luther Garland

A sword arts practitioner renowned as the Blade Master. Friends and rivals with Durian since their student days.



Esmeralda

Kimberly's headmistress. Proudly stands at the apex of magical society.



Vanessa Aldiss

Magical biology instructor. Feared by her students for her wild personality.



Enrico Forghieri

Magical engineering instructor. Prone to outrageous lessons designed to main students.

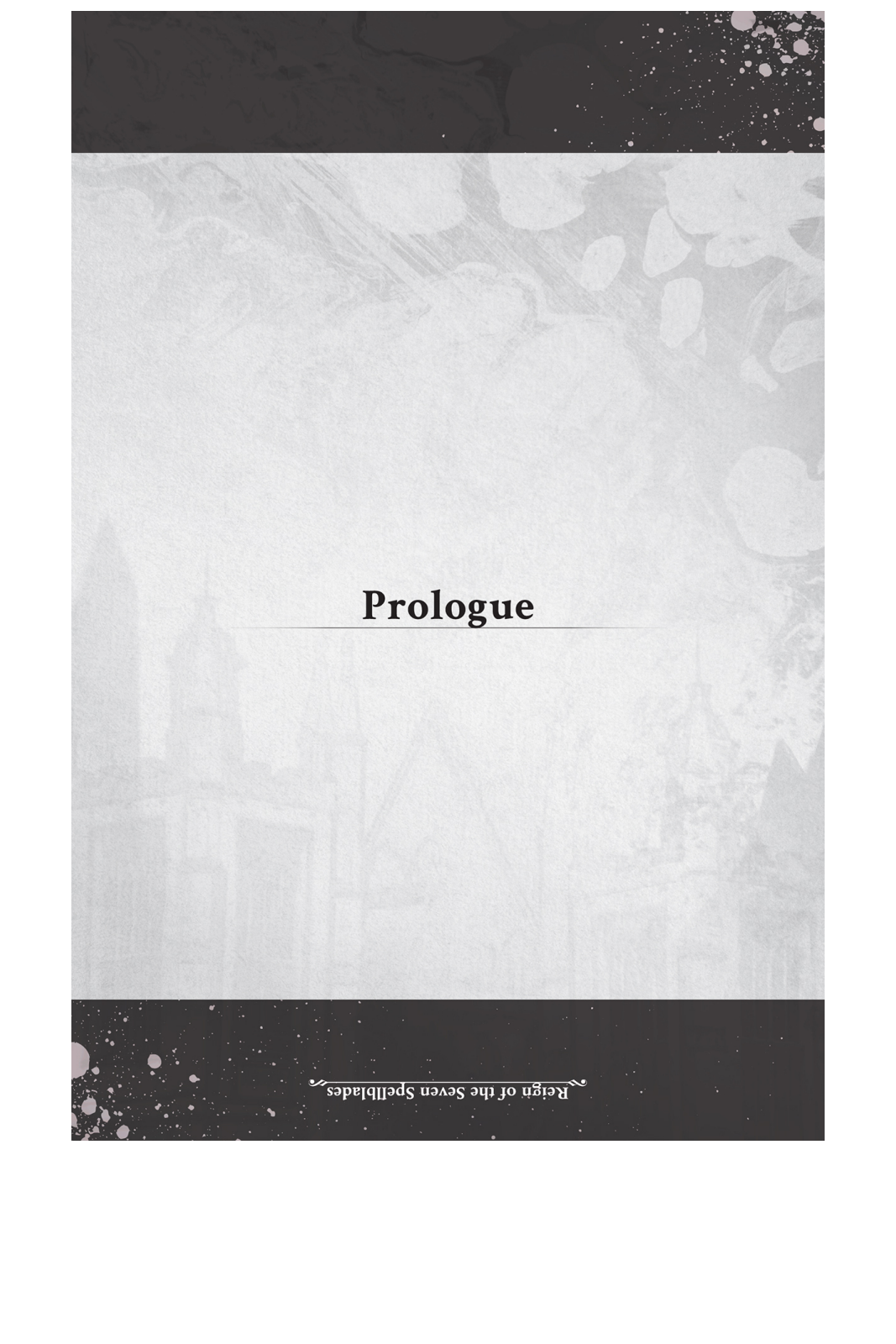


Theodore McFarlane

Chela's father and the man who sent Nanao to Kimberly.

Frances Gilchrist
Dustin Hedges

Darius Grenville



Prologue

Reign of the Seven Spellblades

Prologue

“Mm-hmm! ♪ Hmm-hmm-hmm! ♪ Mm-hmm-mm-hmm-hmm! ♪”

Behind closed doors, the medical ward echoed with the sounds of humming—and even the most generous listener would not call it *in tune*.

“...Ngh...”

Godfrey lay on the operating table, a cold sweat drenching his brow. The school physician, Gisela Zonneveld, had been in an exceptionally good mood all day. It was rare to spot her outside her office, but multiple students had seen her advancing down the corridors grinning ear to ear, and they felt a chill run down their spines. Those with any knack for divination swiftly consulted their auguries in the hopes of spotting the catastrophe to come. As a result, word went around that a hibernating behemoth was going to awaken and topple all of Yelgland. This would leave the campus in consternation for the better part of the week.

“You’ve certainly roasted your own goose here, lad. It will hurt a lot, but you did say ‘*make it quick*.’ I’m nowt about to refuse that. I’m a doctor!”

“...Appreciate...the consideration...,” Godfrey managed, voice shaking, suppressing the urge to bolt for the door. He’d gone up against the greatest threats Kimberly had to offer, and even he couldn’t think of anything that rivaled this for sheer terror.

“Afraid there is nae anesthetic for the etheric body. Best we can do to ease the pain is take yer consciousness down a notch, leave you half asleep, but that borks your self-control. And the moment you most need that? Right after the operation ends. Biggest factor in etheric healing is how focused yer own mind is.”

“...I’m aware. Avoiding pain makes it slower to heal. Can’t argue that.”

Godfrey nodded, steeling his nerves. Dr. Zonneveld got her instruments aligned and turned to him, peering down at his face.

“Godfrey, I’ve a soft spot for ya. Not many berks come back here seven years running. They hit the upper forms, learn to heal their own scrapes and sicknesses, or find friends who can instead. And you know—my work all *hurts*.”

“.....”

“But ye never learned yer lesson. You get it—my way is *faster*. You

never cared nowt about anything but getting back to the fight soon as can be. Brilliant. With that kinda mettle, I can meddle to me heart's content."

Her lips curled diabolically.

"...Not like I enjoy the pain," Godfrey murmured. "I wish there *was* another way. But if I know the purpose, I can endure."

"Oh-ho?"

"I'm student body president. If I shun the pain and go for the lengthy recovery, that prolongs the suffering elsewhere on campus. The pain I go through here is shouldered for them. That's what I tell myself."

That wiped the smile clean from Dr. Zonneveld's face. She turned her back on him, reaching for her medicines.

"Makes no sense to me," she muttered. "Never could see muddling up your pain and that of others as anything but madness. Pain's no more shared than their strength is mine. The fella next to me gets worked over, it's nowt me business, and I laugh about my day. That's how we mages ought to be."

"Then I've found one more illness you can't cure."

He felt he was allowed that much spite. The doctor turned back with his bone in hand, her smile all the more sinister.

"Mouth off while you can, Godfrey. Nothin' I love more than peeking a tough guy trying to stomach the agony. Rivermoore did his job well. These days, you've stopped batting an eye at mere loss of limb."

The tip of her athame touched his bare chest. His teeth clenched, bracing for the suffering to come.

"Let's make this an operation to remember," she purred. "Let me hear you sing, big man."

The muffled cries made it through the infirmary doors, echoing for an hour through the hall beyond. When classes ended and the Sword Roses gathered, they were nearing their end, but even those last few minutes left the group quaking in their boots.

Not long after the groaning ceased, the door opened, and a man emerged. Alvin Godfrey had clearly left half his energy behind on the operating table but was standing tall. Tim—in full drag—ran up, lending him a shoulder.

"You still got your wits, Prez? If you're having a hard time, just cop a feel—I don't mind!"

"...Appreciate the thought."

Godfrey's whisper sounded drained. Without a word, Lesedi slipped under his other arm.

The Sword Roses approached. Not wanting to bombard him from all sides, Chela spoke for the six of them.

"I feared merely returning the bone wouldn't be enough to heal the etheric scar. We'll have to celebrate your recovery some other time. For now, we're glad you made it through, President."

"Thank you, Ms. McFarlane. I hear you all came through big-time."

"And we were rewarded for it. You needn't feel indebted."

"From what I've been told, you went above and beyond. Especially those of you on the final incursion team."

Godfrey's eyes turned to Oliver and Nanao. At this point, he realized the third member of their team was not present.

"...Mr. Leik's not here? I've heard he really made a name for himself."

"Sorry. I suggested he put in an appearance..." Oliver sighed.

Yuri might have solved the Case of the Stolen Bones, but that didn't mean he'd slowed down. He already had his eyes on some other mystery. He was consistent if nothing else—the only real change was that when he *was* on campus, he came to see his teammates more often. Which at least made it easier to track how reckless he was being.

"No need. I'll pay him a visit soon enough. Not just to thank him—he sounds worth getting to know. I've yet to really speak to him."

"Good to hear. But if I'm not there to stop him, he may be a bit... uh, abrasive."

"As long as he doesn't draw his blade, I'll roll with it. Right, Tim?"

"Ha! I'm not saying any of them are worse than me, but all these kids are regular terrors. Especially you, Horn. The way you act all prim and proper makes you extra nasty. I oughtta pin a note to your back saying, *I will lose my shit at the worst possible second.*"

His words cut deep, and Oliver bowed his head. He had no leg to stand on here. Just—infinite gratitude. Tim Linton had stuck by his side through it all, even though he was the one person there who'd barely known Oliver going in.

"...Well, my own flaws aside, let me say this—you're a wonderful person, Mr. Linton."

"Buh?"

Oliver's eyes bored into his, wiping the spite right off the Toxic Gasser's lips. Once he realized the third-year meant every word, Tim got very shiftily.

"Uh, w-well, we all know that! You're, uh, a fine judge of character. Ha. Ha-ha-ha! Compliments won't get you anywhere! These tits are for the president alone."

His voice broke and his eyes were darting around wildly. Lesedi

and Godfrey both gaped at him. Oliver was still giving him a look of open adoration, and Tim broke away from that, turning tail.

“So, uh, bygones are gone by and all that, so come over for a lesson or two when we’re both free. Uh...a-anyway, Prez! I’ll run on back to HQ!”

With that, he was off down the hall like an errant gale. The third-years watched him go, stunned—and Lesedi put a hand to her mouth, stifling a laugh.

“Aha. He’s had so little experience with blatant adoration that a sudden burst of it made his head spin.”

“...Seems like it. A spectacle for the history books.”

Godfrey sounded bemused. Here, Lesedi slipped up behind Oliver without a sound and ground her knuckles into the sides of his head. The sudden pain made him stifle a yelp.

“_____?!”

“Tim had a point, though. You *are* bad news. You’re a heedless heartbreaker!”

“Now, now, let him be, Lesedi. There *are* kids who look up to him. Finding that out is a vital discovery Tim needs.”

“Oh, I’m well aware. Horn, that boy was born trouble, but his future path could change a lot depending on how the folks around him act. Don’t be quick to cut him loose now that you’ve taken a shine to him.”

“_____! P-point taken!”

Having extracted an oath, Lesedi finally let Oliver go. He reeled back, clutching his temples, and his friends swooped in, concerned. Godfrey looked them over.

“Tim’s got a whole year here after Lesedi and I graduate. It’ll be up to active students like you to keep him going. Don’t mean to ask too much of you guys, just...I’ll appreciate it if you do what you can. He *does* get lonely.”

Godfrey mustered a half smile. This time, the others chimed in. Guy and Pete led the way.

“Natch!”

“Mr. Linton helped us during the search, too.”

“We have battled at death’s door together,” Nanao added. “How could I discard that now?”

“Though we need to work on his poisonous impulse control,” Katie concluded.

Godfrey nodded his thanks, looking at each face in turn. Once he’d met every eye there, he looked at Oliver, Nanao, and Chela again.

“Don’t worry about the election,” he said. “But I *am* looking forward to some fierce battles in the league. I won’t ask you to win—but I will ask you to have fun.”

“Okay!”

“Verily!”

“That much I can promise!”

All responded with enthusiasm, certain their battles would live up to that expectation.

Meanwhile, without him ever realizing it—Yuri was reporting to his master.

“.....Hmm.”

Demitrio let out a low growl. He released his grip on the unconscious boy’s head, letting the body slump to the floor.

“Well?” Theodore asked, watching from the ceiling. “How goes your adorable splinter’s investigation?”

“...Rivermoore’s research results and the contents thereof match his advance reports,” Demitrio said. “Good news, but it doesn’t further our ends.”

Theodore narrowed his eyes. “Then he brought back the astral life? That is good news. I had high hopes but more than a few concerns. Deep down, that boy’s heart is far too *kind*.”

“He had some close calls. His conflict with the Watch may well have given his research the shot in the arm it needed. What an odd twist of fate...”

Demitrio paused, hand on his temple. Theodore crooked an eyebrow.

“Mm? Something on your mind, there? I highly doubt even Rivermoore would be reckless enough to pick a fight with Kimberly while busying himself researching the astral life.”

“...Shortly after the resurrection, a reaper made it into the Aria. I assumed the ritual itself had failed, but the Watch’s search team bought enough time for them to birth the astral life.”

“Uh...you mean they fought a reaper? Ha-ha, that’s madness. Like something Chloe would do.”

Theodore clapped his hands appreciatively. Demitrio shot him a glare at the mention of *her* name.

“Your favorite was there. Nanao Hibiya. Had she been the first into the fray, I would not have considered it at all odd. I know full well the people you bring here have that character.”

“Yes, Nanao is totally the type to pick a fight with death itself. But you make it sound like someone else made the first move. Who, exactly? Our resident hothead, Tim?”

“The last person you’d ever expect. That third-year boy, Oliver Horn.”

The smirk vanished from Theodore’s lips.

“That...honestly is a shock. Oh...I mean, I was aware he was accomplished for his age, of course. He and Nanao are blade bound for a reason. But he has a follower’s mentality and spends much of his time reeling Nanao in.”

“Like Edgar used to do?”

That silenced Theodore completely. A stir in his chest like he had not felt in some time. A name that provoked a whole storm of emotions within—no more or less than Chloe Halford herself.

“I need to defeat you, Theo. So I can stand by her side with pride.”

Words that man had said on a stormy night, echoing again in his ear. An awkward sort of friend. And *she’d* loved that awkward side, too. Loved how he’d failed to rid himself of so many things a mage *should* do without.

Thus—he often thought—his love was doomed before it even began.

“The headmistress questioned Oliver Horn regarding Enrico’s disappearance.”

A flat voice interrupted his reverie, pulling him back to the matter at hand.

“...That she did,” Theodore said. “But that was part of a performance Emmy was putting on for the benefit of the entire school. Demonstrating that even the lower forms could be viable suspects. He was never considered a serious candidate. Even if he’d been capable of gleaning some data on the Deus Ex Machina, Enrico invited far more older students to his workshop, and our suspicions were focused on them.”

“I concur. But I also think you and the headmistress tend to put too much stock in Nanao Hibiya. As if the rest of her class are also-rans. That perception can blind you—and not just where Oliver Horn is concerned.”

An edged barb that made Theodore wince. Mages were only human, and it was difficult to avoid biases and blind spots. That was precisely why Demitrio placed an ignorant familiar in charge of the investigation. Free of any and all perception filters, his splinter saw Kimberly with an unvarnished eye.

“Either way, that boy has this splinter’s attention. Until something else catches its interest, it will likely continue pursuing that angle. Fortunately, they seem to trust each other.”

Theodore nodded. He found it hard to believe a mere third-year was at the crux of this matter, but that could also just be his assumptions talking. Still—he hoped it was merely a red herring. Oliver Horn had become a critical piece tying the Azian girl to Kimberly.

Demitrio knelt down, placing his hand on Yuri's head. This familiar was a piece of him, and this was how he made adjustments.

"It's been in use a while and has gathered too much cruft. Let's reduce that clutter. **Exsugere.**"

"—Ah—"

Yuri's body quivered from the shock of having his memories meddled with. A few minutes later, the task was done, and Demitrio rose to his feet. He and Theodore moved aside, leaving Yuri lying on the ground. But a few minutes later, the boy blinked, and he woke up. Like he had always been, oblivious to what had happened.

"The junior league finals are today," Demitrio muttered. "Perhaps I should observe them firsthand."

Theodore mustered a smile. Two eyes up close, two eyes in the stands—four eyes monitoring Oliver's every move.

CHAPTER 1



Ice Dance

CHAPTER 1

Ice Dance

“.....He’s very late.”

The team room on the school’s first floor, with the initial round of the combat league swiftly approaching. Oliver and Nanao were sitting on a bench, playing Magic Chess, but half his attention was on the clock.

“The match is only ten minutes away! Where could he be?”

“That piece is a werewolf,” said Nanao. “It lashes out and claims your head.”

“Again?! This version’s werewolves are brutal! Why make the game even *less* fair...?”

Oliver’s brow furrowed, and he scowled at the board. Someone burst into the room, out of breath—Yuri.

“Made it! The match hasn’t started yet, right?”

“Yuri! We said get here half an hour early!”

“Sorry, sorry, drifted off in the lounge. But hey, that means I’m fresh and ready to go!”

Yuri hopped up and down, demonstrating his claim. Oliver had leaped to his feet, poised to scold his teammate, but he gave up and sighed instead.

“...Well, at least this time we don’t have any complicated strategies. But it’s always possible last-minute intel will force us to rethink our spell choices. Try to be here early!”

“Mm, I won’t be late again! And, um...we’re up again Team Valois this time?”

“Yeah, the advancing team we know the least about. Which doesn’t mean they’re not a threat. Let your guard down at your own peril.”

As Oliver urged focus, Nanao rose from the bench. Yuri spotted the Magic Chess board between them and leaned in to look.

“Ooh, what’s this? Looks like a fun game. Tell me more about it later!”

“Hrm?”

Nanao blinked at him, and Oliver frowned.

“...Yuri, are you still half asleep? You’re the one who first mentioned Magic Chess—”

“Time! Head on in, Team Horn!”

The upperclassman staffing the event interrupted, and the minor confusion was soon forgotten. All three teammates focused on the battle ahead.

“AaaaaaaaaAAAAAAHHHHH! Lllllet’s get this staaarted! The junior combat league!”

The colosseum occupied a whole chunk of the massive main school building, and in the newly installed announcer’s booth, Glenda was already bringing the noise.

“Settle down, Ms. Glenda,” Garland said from his seat beside her. “You’re so hyped up, you sound like a madman.”

“I—I know, but I can *feeeeeeeeeeeel* how good this is gonna be! I bit my tongue five times today already. Why are you not all screaming with me?!”

Glenda flung her arms out wide, and the packed stands let out a roar in response. The fights thus far had been unusually good, and that had everyone amped up. Even Garland was nodding.

“I’m sure these will be fights to remember. The free-for-all was impressive enough, but now we’ve got the top four teams in direct competition. And the outcomes are hard to predict, even with the cards they’ve shown—”

“This seat taken?”

A voice from behind as their pre-match hype peaked. Glenda jumped and spun around—but Garland had noticed this person’s approach. He waved at the chair next to him, glancing at his colleague.

“Instructor Aristides! Not often you show yourself at these things.”

“I’m not the only one.”

The astronomy teacher, Demitrio Aristides, took a seat next to Garland and pointed at the roof above the colosseum. Standing upside down in a dandy dark-brown suit was the ringlet instructor, Theodore McFarlane. Garland shook his head, and Glenda’s eyes gleamed.

“Two instructors here to view the junior leagues? That smells like trouble brewing!”

“You’re free to speculate, but perhaps you should focus on the task at hand, Ms. Glenda.”

“Ha-ha, point taken.”

Glenda had long since learned when to back off and soon buried

her head in her real job. At the center of the colosseum floor stood the ring—as square as a chessboard. From the east and west, the headliners were entering. Using an amplification spell, Glenda got things going.

“And in come our teams! From the east—Team Horn! From the west—Team Valois! Both teams strong enough to make it through the chaos of the free-for-all, but who has the advantage here, Instructors?”

“Hard to say either way. Team Horn overcame greater odds, while Team Valois made smart moves to ensure the odds were never against them. Given the former’s existing fame and the sheer number of matches they’ve fought, Team Valois has an intelligence advantage.”

But at this point, Garland broke off, glancing up at Theodore. The ringlet instructor’s voice rang out from above.

“Each member of Team Horn would be the ace on any other team! If Team Valois lacks the talent to match that, no amount of hidden skills or schemes will make up the difference. If they could be felled by that ilk, they’d never have made it through the previous round!”

Garland grinned, nodding, and his gaze turned to Demitrio. The astronomy instructor’s tone remained as composed as his lectures.

“It depends on how they utilize their quality differences,” he said. “Team Valois’s strengths are of a fundamentally different nature.”

“It’s the samurai!”

“There’s our Hibiya!”

“Cut ’em all down again!”

“Hang in there, Horn! You’re the junior league’s Lanoff rep!”

“You’ve gotta play for keeps, Leik!”

Passionate cries from all directions. Taking stock of the ratios on names used, the girl on the ring’s west end—Ursule Valois—turned to her teammates.

“Ah-ha-haaa! I *knew* it. No one cheers for *us*.”

Like she said, a solid 70 percent of this crowd was backing Team Horn. Probably a direct result of their impressive showing in the previous round, fighting all three opposing teams at once and coming out ahead.

“Still, I don’t, like, care?” Valois said, her inflection rising at the end of each phrase. “We’re mages. Basking in the adulation of the crowd is just weird. You get me?”

“Yes, Lady Ursule.”

“We know our place.”

One boy, one girl, both nodding quietly. Valois scanned the seats for the last time, then fixed her gaze on her opponents.

“This ruckus will be silenced by the time the match is over. It

makes me wanna, like, gag? Just have to grin and bear it for now.”

Meanwhile, Team Horn. Oliver was feeling a bit rattled by the shift in their reception.

“...That’s a lot of noise. The audience is right on top of us.”

“Wow, everyone’s so *excited!*”

“A fitting stage.”

Yuri and Nanao just seemed delighted. Neither one of them was prone to tensing up or having qualms—he alone was reacting that way.

“Guess I don’t need to issue warnings about not letting the crowd get to you guys,” he said with a laugh. “If their enthusiasm seems fun, then go on and bask in it. Our only foes here are the three across the ring.”

With that, he turned his mind to their opponents. As he did, Garland’s voice rang out.

“Time for the rule rundown. This match will be three-on-three—with a twist. Both teams will send a single fighter to the ring, and every three minutes, each will field an additional teammate. The teams will only be complete after six minutes have passed, but anyone taken down in that time will be escorted out. The order of entry will be vital. Who do you send in first? Who do you keep in reserve?”

Oliver nodded. Should they aggressively try and eliminate the opposition at the one-on-one or two-on-two phases? Or should they focus on avoiding losing anyone until the whole team was in play? The best answer would change depending on the team in question. Each would have to predict the other’s choices based on their previous matches. The choice of starting fighter was particularly critical—they would have no one to watch their back.

“Match format is an all-rounder, spells and blades allowed. And for the finals only: Dulling spells are at half strength. We’re allowing that because we believe every finalist has the strength of an upperclassman. The goal is to make the conditions closer to a real fight, with the added tension that brings.”

That announcement sure sent ripples through the stands. At Kimberly, it was hardly a fight if no blood was spilled. Oliver steeled his nerves anew. This match might not kill him—but one mistake could lead to serious injury.

“That’s all!” Garland called. “Both teams, put your starting player forward!”

Oliver glanced once at each companion, then took the stairs up to the ring. They’d sent their entry order to Garland ahead of time, and neither side could change things up after seeing what their opposition

did. As Oliver reached the ring, he saw Ursule Valois coming up the other side. The opposing team was going leader first, too.

“Hmm? Mr. Horn, *you’re* leading? That must mean you won’t get serious until all three of you are here.”

“I’m not good enough for you, Ms. Valois?” he said, taking his starting position.

Chela had relayed Valois’s message to him. That suggested she had something against him, and he was trying to figure out what. But she just grinned and shook her head.

“Nooo? That’s not it at all. I’m more, like, pleased? I want to take out Ms. Hibiya the most, but I want to crush you *first*.”

Her head snapped over sideways, her eyes now in a vertical line. Oliver felt a chill run down his spine. This was different from that aura of strength he’d read from Jasmine Ames in the last match—this was something darker, something sinister.

“Draw wands—begin!”

A hush fell over the colosseum. Oliver had braced for a starting spell, but none came his way. Valois shrugged, not even striking a stance.

“We only have, like, three minutes together, so let’s not waste time with spells, ’kay? The audience came to see a fight, after all.”

“...You wish to fence, then.”

Oliver struck a mid-stance and stepped forward. Valois merely trotted closer his way. As the crowd watched avidly, the gap between them narrowed.

“Oh, neither one casts a spell! They’re going right to blade range!”

“Mr. Horn took her invitation. Given his skills, he’s got no reason to avoid a sword fight—while in her previous matches, Ms. Valois has barely shown a glimpse of her sword art style. This first exchange is one to watch.”

There was a grin on Garland’s lips. He himself had encouraged a “real fight,” and this was hardly that—yet, he had to admit, he liked this better.

“You *always* start with that stance? I sometimes wonder if you would do the same thing against a behemoth.”

“.....”

Even in one-step, one-spell range, Valois kept up her wall of chatter. She took no stance at all, her arms hanging limp at either side. Oliver frowned. Even if one was confident in one’s sword arts skills and extremely scornful of his talents—this was *odd*.

Logically, he should make the first move. But his instincts were blaring a warning: *Don't be too hasty*. He stuck to his mid-stance, and Valois snorted.

"Cat got your tongue? *Suuuch* a dull boy."

Her feet firmly planted together, bolt upright, Valois began to raise the athame in her right hand, holding it out before her. At a glance, this hardly seemed worth calling a stance. Her arm was fully extended, and with her feet together like that, she could neither step in nor out with any efficiency. She couldn't even attack without pulling her arm in first—her previous posture had actually been *better*.

The tip of her blade rose slowly. And as Oliver's gaze locked onto it—Valois was on him, as if the time in between had not existed.

"____?!"

His arm moved on pure reflex. Barely deflecting the blade as it shot toward his eyes. Oliver turned that into a slash at her—but the moment their blades clashed, Valois's body slipped to one side, like a willow caught in a gale. His athame caught empty air.

"Nice parry," Valois said, recovering their range. "Still..."

At last, Oliver's eyes caught it: her feet, not moving at *all*...yet sliding across the floor. A spectacle that seemed downright unreal.

"...the dance has only just begun. Are you fit to serve as my partner?"

"Whoa, she cut in standing bolt upright! No warning signs! The way she moves—it's like sliding on ice! Instructor Garland, what is this?!"

"Ice Walking. A gait made possible by eliminating friction below the soles with spatial magic. The terrain type affects the difficulty, but the smooth stone here is ideal. And the way her first move drew his attention to the tip of her athame to obfuscate the distance—the Point Pull—was very clever. But this—"

Garland's eyes had followed her every move, even as he spoke. It was so strange—nothing like any other student in this league. When she moved, when she turned, when she stopped—she never pushed her feet against the ground. A mage with complete control over their center of gravity could use that to *disguise* their coming actions—but Valois's approach was something else entirely. As Garland gaped at it, Demitrio took over the analysis.

"She's switching from one action to the next without transition. Impossible with Ice Walk techniques based on conventional inertia. Even combined with balance control, these movements are inconceivable. Which means she most likely used—"

“...The repulsive element!”

Midway through the commentary, Oliver himself figured out the secret. Attacking with inhumanly complex, unpredictable movements, like dancing on ice, Valois heard him and spoke up.

“You noticed? It’s called Floating. Fun, right?”

Even as she talked, her blade snapped at his throat. Oliver just managed to deflect, thinking fast. This couldn’t be a matter of simple friction reduction. He’d suspected conventional Hovering, but that would generate air currents at her feet, and he could find no trace of those. That led him to the repulsive element—namely, sliding by pushing against the floor via the element laced through your soles. The propulsion was an application of that principle, likely generated by intentionally disturbing the balance of the cushion beneath the soles of the feet. Likely categorized as an advanced form of Ice Walking.

He could grasp the outline of the logic, at least. But that drove home the horrifying degree of position and mana control it would require. Years of training just to move at all, and to get good enough to use it in a sword arts duel—the difficulty was so mind-boggling, he couldn’t even begin to estimate a time frame. The flat stone surface was almost certainly aiding her, but this technique was nonetheless positively transcendent.

“Hfff...!”

He couldn’t let her slide free. With that in mind, when she was in range, Oliver activated spatial magic. He slightly softened the ground before him in a five-by-twenty-foot area. Not enough to trip anyone up, but floating via the repulsive element wouldn’t work there.

“Ughhh, I don’t get why you’d *do* that. Why not just slide yourself?”

Valois came to a stop right in front of the softened ground. Naturally, Oliver had expected as much.

“*Hah...!*”

He lunged into a thrust, aiming for that momentary pause. Even when Floating, as long as the *person* had weight, inertia applied. Valois was paused, and Oliver was lunging—he had speed on his side. With feints eliminated, Floating was no match for pure velocity.

Valois just managed to get her blade up against his—but since she’d been in nothing resembling a stance, merely raising her hand made this a very feeble block. And Oliver had momentum—she couldn’t stop his lunge. Even as their blades clashed, his easily pushed hers back—

“___?! ”

That didn’t feel right. It was *too* easy. He’d sensed no resistance at all. Her blade was repelled, and Valois’s body was knocked into a spin.

Sensing danger, Oliver yanked his athame back as her rotation completed and her blade gleamed. He bent backward and felt a searing heat on his cheek. Drops of crimson fell, mottling the ground below.



“Sooo close! A little deeper, and it would have been all over.”

Valois was poised at relevé. A wave of fear brushed aside the pain in his cheek. For the first time, she'd used a technique he could identify—the Koutz-school piqué stance.

“Ah!”

“He took a hit!”

“Was that...?!”

Kate and Guy yelped at the sight of their friend's blood, half rising from their seats. Pete's eyes went wide, baffled by the clash he'd just seen. Their questions were answered by the witch next to them—Miligan.

“Tour is an advanced Koutz technique. When you block an opponent's blow, you absorb the impact, spinning like a top into a counter. To make that possible on land requires footing with minimal friction.”

It had been too fast for their eyes, but Miligan had caught Valois's every gesture. She'd blocked the blow standing on the toe of one foot, and if Oliver hadn't bent back in time, that slash *would* have eliminated him.

“It's considered most effective as a response to an opponent rushing to end things and lunging in too deep...which is not really what happened here. Oliver's thrust was at an appropriate range and force, yet Ms. Valois still turned that into a Tour capable of drawing blood. Calling her arts refined is an understatement.”

“Very impressive,” Garland effused. “That is well beyond incorporating a taste of Koutz.”

In the ring, the fight was back on. Oliver Horn on the ropes against unfamiliar moves, and Ursule Valois using her Floating step to make her attacks shift and unpredictable. It looked less like a fight and more like a ballet performance.

Demitrio seemed equally impressed. “I'd say she's adamantly eliminated anything *but* Koutz. The way she moves her feet and body on friction-free footing proves it. It's been decades since I've seen a student at her level in the third year.”

A missed block left a shallow cut on Oliver's arm. He swung back, but it was deflected harmlessly, occasionally converting into a nasty counter. The Floating footwork defied his comprehension, and in each exchange, he was on the defensive.

It was a relentless struggle, but gritting his teeth and bearing it was his only option. He knew full well her goal was to frustrate him into lashing out. So he hunkered down, grimly avoiding a fatal strike, enduring, enduring, enduring.

“Pure Koutz, yes?”

Amid the endless agony, he dropped a question. Raising a blade dyed red with his blood, Valois’s languid voice answered.

“Yes? Unlike you poor, talentless souls, the sword *chose* me. You and I simply started on different stages.”

She slid toward him once more. By this point, she was combining her Floating moves with more conventional footwork to feint in ways Oliver couldn’t read. He was using Grave Soil to soften the floor and resist, but no sooner did it take effect than Valois’s own spatial magic corrected it. And since the ring itself had a self-repair spell built into it, playing Whac-A-Mole would leave him drained first—she had the larger mana pool.

“People think Koutz is, like, abstruse? But that just means it’s a cluster of moves that Lanoff and Rizett couldn’t theorize. Teaching conceptual and abstract techniques requires the learner to have the capacity to *feel* how they work—in other words, you need a knack for it. And *thaaat* is why the mediocre never get anywhere.”

Each turn of phrase seemed designed to wind him up. But however extreme the rhetoric, Oliver was forced to concede that Valois had a point. In fact, he *had* tried to learn some Koutz moves, and his efforts had bounced off the very impasse she described.

Of the three core schools, Koutz had the fewest practitioners. This was simply because so few people had the knack required to learn it, and even those blessed few tended to learn a mix of it and other schools—so pure Koutz users were exceedingly rare. Supposedly one in a thousand. Whether that number was accurate or not, it was a fact that Ursule Valois was the first pure Koutz fighter Oliver had ever encountered.

“Still can’t accept it? Then I’ll make you.”

A standard step in and a thrust. Oliver backed away steadily, defending—but as Valois’s arm hit full extension and her feet stopped, the tip just kept coming.

“.....!”

Surprised, his defense came late, the deflection flimsy, and the blade gouged a shallow cut in the side of his neck. She’d connected the standard step to a Floating move—he could grasp the logic, but the speed of it all was so uncannily consistent that it confused his perceptions.

“You’re trying *sooo* hard to understand. But you see? I don’t have to. I just, like, get it? I was *born* this way. Since I was a tiny little girl,

I was raised in a frictionless room.”

As her onslaught bewildered him, Valois began reminiscing. Oliver knew the way she moved was not achievable with just an innate knack. These techniques were mastered by honing those senses through training in every aspect of life. Koutz practitioners believed friction was a result of impurities of motion, and Valois had likely been raised in an environment based on that principle. At the cost of anything like a human childhood.

“You mediocrities with your languages and principles and experience, all that binding you. Banal reasoning in a banal vessel—already unfit for Koutz.”

She sneered at him. Oliver knew she’d lived the opposite of what she’d just described, that this was how a pure Koutz fighter was given shape. Never teaching her common sensibilities in the first place. Never once allowing her to develop ordinary rationales or morals. Thoroughly eliminating all that clutter and honing only her unnatural aptitude, crystalizing her into a mage—she was a *creation* manufactured accordingly.

“And people like you just run away to Lanoff, which is why it’s always so popular. When I see you all fighting among yourselves, I cannot help but laugh. Why spend *sooo* much time ranking one another when no one can tell the difference?”

Her scorn was no longer even directed at Oliver, but the entirety of Lanoff sword arts practitioners. The presiding strength of Lanoff was the polished logistics of it and the reproducibility of the techniques at higher levels. But to her, that was simply the escape provided to the talentless.

“...What’s your *real* problem?”

Valois’s shoulders twitched. By this point, Oliver had a solid grasp on where her ideals lay, why she looked down on him, but that alone wasn’t enough.

“I’ve heard your speech,” he continued. “I could disagree, but let’s not for now. The thing is—if you truly believed your own words, there’d be no real enmity here. At best, you’d have felt a mix of pity and contempt. But you clearly despise me—*us*. Right?”

Oliver was hammering this point home. Since the second Valois took the stage, he’d felt it. Felt what lay beneath her goading and her insults. Sensed the swirling heat of her hostility.

This was the polar opposite of what he’d once sensed from Joseph Albright. Both placed Oliver firmly beneath them, but Albright’s contempt had masked a hollow core. Valois was something else. Not duty, not obligation—she loathed Oliver Horn for personal, emotional reasons. Or perhaps those were directed at something larger than himself.

“...You *really* piss me off.”

Sounding extra irate, Valois renewed her onslaught. Their athames clashed; she used Sticky Edge to attach herself to Oliver's blade and twist herself, sliding around to his side. Oliver's impulse was to fend that off with a sweeping slash, but her counter would likely take out his sword hand. Instead, he used Sticky Edge himself, delaying her blade's release and turning enough to attempt a left-handed grab at her dominant wrist.

“____?!”

But as he did, his right foot slipped. Valois's spatial magic had negated the floor's friction. He used balance control to right himself before taking a tumble, but by that time, Valois's blade had already shifted to her next attack. He only just managed to block it, gritting his teeth.

“See, seeee? You're nothing but talk! Did you think you knew Koutz after facing Mr. Rossi's sad imitation? His sensibilities are not that shabby, but his approach is riddled with impurities. I can't *bear* to watch. He's smearing dirt in our faces.”

Valois's abuse was now spreading past Oliver onto his rivals. His blade struck hers with added force, less an attack than a demonstration of intent.

“...Take that back.”

“*That* ticked you off?” Valois looked utterly baffled. “You get angry over the oddest things.”

“**Frigus!**”

“**Flamma!**”

A blast of ice from behind her, answered by flames over Oliver's shoulder. The two spells collided and canceled each other out, and the duelists' teammates took up positions alongside them.

“Ohhh? Was that three minutes already? Perhaps I chatted too much. Whatever!”

The fight had shifted to the two-on-two phase, and both sides stepped back, resetting the battle. Her katana pointed at their foes, Nanao spoke to Oliver at her side.

“A formidable opponent.”

“Yeah, be careful. You've never fought anyone like her.
Sanavulnera.”

Oliver pressed his athame to his neck, healing the wound there. The longer this fight went on, the more that blood loss would wear him down. That was the biggest difference half-strength dulling made.

Valois had taken no injuries and needed no healing. The only reason she'd taken a step back to reset was because Nanao's entry changed up her opposition in ways she couldn't ignore. Nanao herself was a powerhouse, and her presence meant Oliver could play an

entirely different role. For all her scorn and hostility, Valois was no stranger to how dangerous he could be.

“Lady Ursule, instructions?”

“Crush Mr. Horn first. Match me precisely.”

Her team’s second entry was Gui Barthé. Valois’s answer was swift and clear—taking out the weaker opponent was a standard tactic. And three minutes sight-reading pure Koutz had taken a hefty toll on Oliver Horn. The fight had been skating on thin ice all along, but he’d cleared a major hurdle—and moments like that could provide the opening they needed.

Naturally, Oliver and Nanao were aware of that. And they weren’t prepared to play along.

“It’s time, Nanao!”

“Indeed. ***Gladio!***”

Nanao stepped in hard, firing the first blow. A severing spell broad enough to catch both opponents—but with a different effect on each side. Her swing had been a rising diagonal, going for Valois’s shins and, to her left, Gui’s waist.

“Hmm.”

“***Impetus!***”

Their responses differed inevitably. Valois merely hopped forward, but Gui had to pull up short and counter with a wind spell. Oliver did not let this discrepancy go unpunished.

“***Tonitrus!***”

As Valois’s feet left the ground, he fired a bolt aimed to strike her in midair. Her free-form Floating footwork didn’t help her there; plus, Gui had just fired a spell on his end, preventing him from assisting. Valois would be forced to counter with a spell of her own, leaving her defenseless the moment she landed. The plan was to have Nanao take a swing at her there.

However, Oliver’s expectations were soon thwarted. The bolt came at her, but Valois chanted no spell. She simply pointed her athame at it—and like a pinwheel in a sudden gale, her entire body went spinning off to one side.

“Hrm?!”

And she didn’t *just* spin. The electric bolt was caught up in it, turned a solid ninety degrees, and sent flying away—passing right before Nanao’s eyes and forcing her to pull up short and use her double-handed Flow Cut on it. While she did, Valois landed safely, sliding smoothly across the floor.

“That’s the Koutz Flow Cut. *Your* feeble output? It’s a mere *trifle* to deflect.”

The move alone was enough to make Oliver shudder. Where Nanao’s Flow Cut used elemental synchronization to affect the spell

and deflect it, the Koutz variation used a repulsive element to make the spell push the practitioner. Avoiding the strike like a leaf on the wind and cleverly bending the course to strike her foe. Oliver had known it existed, but it'd been a long time since he'd seen it used with such precision.

“Shaaa!”

The bolt handled, Nanao resumed her charge. She'd missed her chance to strike on the landing, but she was hardly the type to let that get her down. Valois met her with a hazy sort of stance, while Nanao didn't hesitate to unleash a bamboo chopper from a high stance.

“Ah-ha-haaa!”

Blocking the heavy blow made Valois lean way back, but turning horizontal didn't mean a Koutz practitioner was dead. Her spin dragged Nanao's katana with her, and Valois came out from it with a strike on the other side. Nanao pulled her arms back quickly but couldn't quite dodge—the tip scraped the top layer of skin. Not because her response came late—the sheer strength of Nanao's strike lent speed to Valois's Tour.

“Hng...!”

“Such *power*! And you aimed for the axis, too,” Valois said, sliding backward. “But the flow of power one moment ago and right now? They are *always* different.”

Nanao *had* lined up her strike with her foe's axis—she'd seen the Tour in action against Oliver and knew how it functioned. But that was exactly why Koutz fencers spent so much time learning to disguise the angle of that axis.

“Your double-handed Flow Cut is, well, *nice*. But it's no more than a buffed-up version of an ordinary's swordplay. I know I'm *faaar* better at manipulating power than you. Shall we test that theory?”

“By all means!”

Nanao looked delighted. She cut in, blissfully unaware she was being goaded, just thrilled to be up against a new kind of fighter.

“...Damn, she's good. And she was just hiding out in our year?” a boy in the stands grumbled—Rosé Mistral, leader of the group that had given Team Horn headaches with their splinters and transformations. His two teammates sat with him, and in the row in front were the three girls they'd worked with in that same match.

“I was not expecting a pure Koutz practitioner. My mind can't even grasp what's happening. Yet, Mr. Horn is fending it off sight unseen.”

“Yo, get it together, Horn!”

“Jaz's rep is riding on this!”

This team was led by Jasmine Ames, a skilled sword arts practitioner with bangs hiding half her face. While she was quietly watching the match unfold, her teammates were positively frothing—in large part because Oliver had defeated Ames one-on-one near the end of the previous match.

The third team from their makeshift alliance was seated some distance away, perhaps mindful of having been on the other side during the bone-recovery mission. Jürgen Liebert, the team leader, was an expert on classic golem arts.

“That’d be tricky,” he said, watching Oliver and Valois’s battle avidly. Then he asked his teammates, “How would we handle it?”

“Outgun her from blow one. Kinda rough to do under these terms, though.”

“The ring itself is so much smaller. Hard to stay at range the whole battle.”

Camilla Asmus, a skilled sniper, and Thomas Chatwin, her partner. Camilla’s hawklike eyes were locked on the match, catching every second of Oliver’s struggle.

Team Valois’s second member, Gui Barthé. Average build, polished Rizett, striking swordplay in a style vastly different from Koutz. Oliver had fought him at close range for a while, but they were interrupted when least expected. Ursule Valois had been fighting Nanao to the southwest, but now she used the strength of a strike to send herself sliding over to them.

“...Gah...?!”

A sharp stab aimed right at Oliver’s face. He twisted himself to avoid it but couldn’t do the same for her follow-up slash. The blade raked across his brow, splitting it, and Valois delightedly pressed the advantage.

“That looks, like, painful? You worked *sooo* hard to fend me off. It must hurt to have someone else after you! I bet you wish you could focus on just one, hmm?”

“***Gladio!***”

Nanao jumped in, not about to leave a friend on the ropes. Oliver sensed her spell coming from behind and ducked under it. The spell passed overhead, bearing down on Valois, but her teammate stepped up and canceled it.

“Hmm...”

Her surprise attack easily handled, Valois frowned. Clearly displeased.

“I did *not* need you backing him up. It might *seem* like we’re doing the same thing, but I don’t see it. You are nothing like us. Teamwork

as an extension of phony friendship. So gross. Makes me wanna vom.”

As she muttered, she was persistently on Oliver’s heels. Insisting she was strong, that her way was better—as if her parade of blows would force him to concede that point. Like getting him to admit as much mattered more to her than the outcome of the match itself.

“So I’m going to *demonstrate* the difference. I have taught my arms and legs properly, and our teamwork is just *sooo* much better. You and your beloved trust, bonds, camaraderie—all of those mean absolutely nothing.”

With that, she spun, slashing. Oliver managed to parry, but then a spark burst before his eyes. Not much of a shock, but it landed square on his wounded brow.

“.....!”

“Ouch? Even a little pinch scatters your focus like mad,” Valois teased with a smirk.

She’d used Flash Wisp not to blind him but to prod the wound. On its own, merely a nasty trick, but Oliver could hardly afford the loss of concentration that momentary pain brought. A clever means of wearing him down.

“*Hahhh!*”

Here Nanao’s blade came swinging in. Valois caught the sweep of it and went flying back. Her teammate retreated with her, and both teams stood at range again.

“Ughhh, *this* again? Every time your little friend is slightly disadvantaged, you go for the lukewarm assist. If that had been *us*? I would have used him as a decoy and circled around behind. Why didn’t you? That pawn is *sooo* raggedy; what other use for him could there be than as bait?”

Valois was positively fuming now. As Oliver caught his breath, Nanao stepped up beside him.

“Oliver, your forehead—”

“On it,” he said before she’d even finished.

Flames laced his athame, and he seared the wound shut with the flat of the blade. No time to waste healing it, and at least this way he’d keep the blood out of his eyes. Nanao nodded, and he focused back on the enemy before them.

Watching this from the stands, Katie let out a little shriek. She was the queen of ignoring her own pain when hyperfocused but found it far harder to handle when her friends did the same.

“...I can’t look... Oliver’s covered in wounds!”

“Can’t believe there’s really someone he can’t handle...”

Guy seemed as stunned as Katie was horrified. Miligan merely

shook her head.

“At ease. There’s no cause for concern.”

“Agreed,” Pete said, nodding emphatically.

The others turned to him, shocked.

“...Ms. Valois is strong, for sure. But she’s a fool—she’s chosen to fight Oliver on *his* turf.”

“We’re almost at six minutes, hmm? I’m getting tired of lecturing you,” Valois whispered.

She’d been after Oliver every one of those minutes. Her plan had been to take him out before the teams were complete—if he hung on any longer, the finale stage would be all the more difficult. Certain she’d whittled away his focus by now, she saw him stagger, and she went for the kill.

“Sooo—it’s time I end things!”

She floated around to his side, used a spin to feint, then a diagonal slash from below that she hoped would be the clincher. But instead, a hard hit landed in the pit of her stomach. Caught flat-footed, she staggered back—and Oliver’s foot came into view. He’d intentionally staggered to make her commit, then used his cloak to conceal his Hidden Tail.

“...Gah—”

“Lady Ursule!”

Doubled over, she floated away. Oliver chose not to pursue, standing at the ready.

“You lack patience, Ms. Valois,” he said. “I could keep this up for six *hours*.”

“Whoa, the tables turn on Ms. Valois!” Glenda cried. “Her Koutz had Mr. Horn on the defensive, but has he finally found a way to fight back?”

“...No, that was more...” Garland trailed off.

“Mr. Horn still can’t read her Koutz,” Demitrio said. “That was a simple error on her part. The natural result of taking a risk when your opponent’s still in the fight. Anyone could see it coming.”

Harsh words, but the results spoke for themselves. On the ceiling above, Theodore nodded, folding his arms.

“This could be interesting,” he said with relish. “Ms. Valois’s talents are far superior, but Mr. Horn is prodding the weakness behind them. They’re an excellent match.”

"I can't read your blade. But it's quite easy to read your *mind*."

Oliver spoke softly. Six minutes had arrived, and the last member of each team took the field. With both leaders in poor shape, the fight had a momentary pause. Healing the wounds Valois had left all over him, Oliver let his voice grow stern.

"Our fight didn't wear me down. It got to you. You meant to take me out in the first three minutes and failed. When the next three resulted in little more than scratches, you got flustered. The rancor you thought would undermine my confidence was reflected back on you. That's why you tried to settle things fast—and the result was that *banal* assault."

That word made her shoulders jump. His breath caught, Oliver struck a mid-stance. Not merely a pose but an aspect of his routine—a gesture meant to settle his fraying nerves. And that tipped her off: She knew his mind was not nearly as battered as he looked.

"The depths of Koutz are unfathomable. But that means the practitioner must be equally inscrutable. Ms. Valois, your heart is not where you moves need it!"

As his cry echoed, there was a dull *snap*. Something fell to the ground at Valois's feet. Glistening white, tinged with red. A molar, snapped by the force of her bite. Both teammates—the third was Lélia Barthé—blanched in horror.

"L-Lady Ursule...!"

"...Okaaay, I'm calm again!" Valois said, blood running down her chin. "Spare me, would you? Getting howled at by a dog makes my brains boil."

Valois handled her fury by beating the cause to a pulp, but when that was not easily done, she had a backup routine. Intense pain and the taste of blood. This didn't quell her fury—it simply focused her scattered emotions into unadulterated bloodthirst.

"But you have a point? Sure, it's all puke from a doggy's mouth, but, like, I concede the validity. I did *not* expect you to last this long. Clearly, I misread things. Which means I have to change the plan."

She may have soaked a hit, but she still had her aplomb. Her teammates leaned in.

"...How do we play it, Lady Ursule?"

"They're good. Our formation should be—"

"No need."

"Huh?"

They both blinked at her. Valois never even glanced their way.

"I don't need your *minds*. Those are just in my way. I'll handle the rest, so gimme all you got."

Both grew tense. And began to beg.

"...Lady Ursule, please..."

"We can win this! I promise—!"

"No one asked for your *opinions*. 'Kay, good niight. Domininexum."

Valois's spell came without mercy, and her teammates' heads drooped. Yuri caught up with the rest of Team Horn, frowning at the sight ahead.

"Hmm...?"

"What's up with them?"

The two teammates' heads came back up, eyes hollow. Leaving them off to the side, Valois wiped the blood from her chin and stepped forward.

"All done. Time we got the *reeeal* show underway."

No sooner had the words left her mouth than her teammates started Floating.

"?!"

Oliver gulped, and then all three fired spells. They were easily dodged. Movements without tells, darting in every direction—exactly like Valois fought, using her Floating footwork to befuddle their opponents.

"Hrm—?!"

"Whyyyy?! Weren't you just using Rizett?!" Yuri asked, wide-eyed, his sword clashing against Gui Barthé's.

Eyes on the other two opponents, Oliver thought the same thing. The boy he'd been fighting had definitely favored the Rizett style. Yet, now he and the new arrival were using the same Koutz style as Valois herself.

Faced with the same puzzle, Nanao frowned, muttering, "They've changed their very styles. 'Tis as if they are entirely different foes."

"...No, that's more than a change," Oliver growled.

Those vacant expressions had him worried. Before Oliver's thoughts caught up with him, Yuri broke off his exchange with Gui and got ahead of him.

"Oh! They haven't changed. They're all *the same*."

Like her teammates, Valois turned two, three times, but her destination was, as always, Oliver. Her own fighting style remained the same, undisturbed. Desperately fending off an assault that could easily end him at the slightest error, he looked her squarely in the eye.

"What did you do to them, Ms. Valois? They're your teammates!"

"Teammates?" she asked, looking blank. "What are those? I never had any."

Forget what lay before them—Oliver sensed a fundamental perception gap. He shuddered, and her next words proved his instincts were accurate.

"Team Valois was always just me. And two *familiars*."

“...Mind control?” Godfrey growled, watching the match from the stands.

“She’s not just turning them into puppets, though,” Lesedi said from next to him. “The burden of controlling all three would diminish the performance of each—but they’re clearly *all* matching Valois’s standard.”

This seemed bizarre even to her. Robbing others of their will and pulling their strings—that was not particularly unusual in mage circles. They’d fought against similar techniques several times. And that was exactly *why* the singular nature of Valois’s approach stood out.

Tim got there first. “I bet she’s messed with their minds and bodies till she got a channel established, directly linking the etheric bodies. Got total control over ’em down to the functions of their brains. Shit, that’s digging up some gnarly memories.”

He swore, reminded of the late Ophelia. Godfrey knew all too well why he felt that way, although his own brow furrowed for very different reasons.

“But to Team Horn, that means they’re functionally fighting three pure Koutz practitioners. Possibly even worse—now all three are a single organism, operating in perfect tandem. There will be no gaps in their teamwork...”

“Whoa, this is something else! I can’t figure out how *any* of them move!” Yuri cried, bewildered by the perplexities of the Koutz style.

His preternatural instincts were alive and kicking, but even with that assist in place, he was unable to fight back here. Oliver had expected as much. Fighting three Koutz masters at once was virtually unprecedented, even in the history books.

“What’s wrong? I get serious, and now you’re, like, helpless?”

Flawless coordination buffeting them from all sides, Valois continued to taunt. Oliver longed to shut her up, but doing so would be no small task.

Dancing wildly around the stage, Valois cried, “This is true synergy! Fundamentally different from your childish games! All that useless thinking swept away, every synapse, every reflex under my control! They are my arms and legs, fighting as I see fit! Nothing could be stronger! Nothing could be better! Anything else is inherently mistaken!”

As her pitch rose, so did the ferocity of her attacks. Three spinning tops bouncing off one another, altering one another’s paths, their trajectories far more complex than when she alone had been Floating. And against that, Team Horn could read no patterns, make no careless

“You seeee? Everything you hold dear was never of *any* use at all! Your arms are filled with worthless trash, weighing you down for absolutely no reason! Yet, you do not even realize this! Because you are *hopeless imbeciles!*”

But their movements weren't the problem. Oliver ground his teeth. Facing challenges in combat was all in a day's work. Utterly unacceptable assertions, and the insults they encompassed—those went in one ear and out the other. What he *couldn't* stomach was the third factor.

“They’re your servants, aren’t they? They’ve been with you for years—since you were a child.”

Valois's head dropped to one side again, clearly utterly missing his point. A vortex of rage and sorrow swirled within him. Pouring both emotions into his glare, he looked her squarely in the eye.

“Don’t you get it?” Oliver growled. “Do you not even see what you’re trampling?”

The tiny body growing cold in her hands. A piece of her heart lost with it, an insistent void left behind.

Valois slipped across the floor, attacking. Weathering the onslaught, Oliver kept his gaze locked on hers. Cries went up from the stands.

“Don’t let those puppets get you down!”

Katie and Guy were screaming at the tops of their lungs. Oliver heard them loud and clear, but so did Valois—and she couldn't bear the din.

Her irritation surged. More voices poured fuel on the fire.

“Don’t half-ass things, Hibiya! You were ten times fiercer against us!”

Mistral and Ames chimed in, voicing the experience of their earlier match. And those cries made something in Valois snap. She was incapable of letting this wash over her. She broke off her attacks, head leaning all the way back, bellowing at the rafters.

[illegible]

Her fury shook the air across the entire arena. The audience gulped. Valois's wrathful gaze swept the crowd, sparing no one present.

“You are so gross! Them, you, everyone! Anyone rooting for Team Horn! Clowns who lost to them and have the nerve to be here at all! Every one of you is smearing dirt on the face of Kimberly!”

These emotions were far more raw than what she’d shown before. A cry from Ursule Valois’s very heart. Oliver and his companions all drew up short, listening closely.

“You are *impure*! You are mages, yet you pretend to have *friends*?! Laughing and crying like *humans*! Love? Respect? Consideration? That is all *clutter*, worse than refuse! Do *not* bring that crap here!”

The roar left her breathing hard, head hanging. Physical demonstrations of unbearable fatigue.

“...*Control* and *obedience*...! If you have that...then you need nothing else! *Nothing*!”

This was more of a croak than a yell. It hurt to look at her.

“Is that actually what you believe?” Oliver asked. “Or is it a cry for help?”

“Rrrgh—! You do *not* get to talk!”

Valois’s head snapped up, and she rocketed toward him on floating feet. Oliver absorbed the force of her blow with his blade, sending her into a spin. Motions boggling the eye, she attacked from the air. He couldn’t possibly see her. She was certain she’d claim his head—

—but the proof of that never hit her hands. The moment of truth never came.

“...Huh?”

Hitting nothing, Valois landed—and blood sprayed from her sword hand. She gaped down at the wound. It took a moment for the horrifying reality to dawn: This wound came at her foe’s blade.

“He’s got her,” Garland said.

Glenda turned to him, eyes wide, so he offered further explanation.

“This time, it wasn’t *her* mistake. He predicted her attack and got ahead of it, then went for an Encounter.”

“Y-you mean he can *see* her moves now? His eyes have caught up with Ms. Valois’s pure Koutz in these scant few minutes?!”

Glenda clearly found that hard to believe. Listening to them on the ceiling above, Theodore shook his head, speaking with conviction.

“Only a true genius could do *that*. And Mr. Horn is no genius.”

He’d taught many a student in his time and had an eye for the source of their individual strengths. To him, it was plain as day. Patently obvious. The sheer quantity of work that lay in Oliver’s past, the work that had brought him to this point.

“He’s simply spent *years* on it. Not here, but *outside* the ring.”

“Each Koutz master has a style all their own.’ A famous line we’ve all heard before.”

Valois was staring blankly at the cut on her arm, healing forgotten. So Oliver started talking, his voice calm and quiet. Nanao and Yuri had been fighting the mind-controlled duo, but they backed off, letting him talk.

“That was meant as a jeer at the discrepancies in ability between practitioners of a notoriously difficult style—but if you ask me, it’s not only an exaggeration but part of the Koutz school’s attempt at controlling their own reputation. However deep your techniques go, they are still a set of sword arts based on the capabilities of the human body. There are only so many valid core theories in existence.”

His voice stabbed into her. No matter how much she detested the sound of it, Valois could not make him stop. No matter what she said or how she argued, the blood flowing from her right arm agreed with him.

“From our clashes so far, your techniques are strongly influenced by a famous Koutz master from a century ago, the Ice Dancer herself—Luana Pederzini. Floating is a technique she developed late in life, yes? She never made it official, but for the sake of argument, I’ll call her techniques the Luana style. After making careful observations and comparing that against my knowledge base, I’ve finally formed a cogent notion of your moves,” Oliver said at length. “Of the three main schools, Koutz fighters are the toughest to pin down a specific pedigree. The school itself is inherently abstruse, compounded by that myth about each master’s unique style. You yourselves have intentionally made it harder to trace, and that attempt is supported by the sheer scarcity of practitioners at all. Before you even hit the ring, you’re winning the information battle.”

He paused, raising his arm into mid-stance. The sheer time he’d poured into his training ensured that pose was steady as a rock.

“Based solely on knowledge gleaned from trusted sources, I’ve put together my own chart of Koutz fighter connections. Where do you fall within that tree? From the moment I realized I was facing a pure Koutz practitioner until a few minutes ago, that’s been my pressing concern.”

Oliver curled the fingers of his left hand, beckoning to her. Valois shot across the floor, bearing down on him in a flurry of feints. But his response showed no trace of hesitation. Their blades clashed with a shower of sparks, the metal of her blade screeching as it made no headway.

“I can’t read *every* move of yours. And I certainly can’t reproduce them myself. But I’m familiar with the concepts. I know how you want to fight and what you *don’t* want me doing.”

“_____!”

Valois bit her lip in frustration. He seemed so far away. She couldn’t picture her blade reaching him no matter how she approached. Like a firmly rooted oak, a sturdy fortress. Just looking up at it choked the air from her lungs. He pushed back on her blade, and she retreated. With that outcome clear as day, he wrapped up his speech.

“That means I can make predictions and adjustments. Nanao, Yuri—it’s time. We’re done playing defense.”

At that, his companions sprang into action. Team Valois’s mind-controlled duo followed suit, moving exactly as the original Valois did, each sliding after their opponent.

“Flamma!”

“Impetus!”

Nanao and Yuri each cast a spell. The Valois duo made to counter them with a Flow Cut but were forced to stop and cast an oppositional spell to cancel—the incoming spells were *too close*. And with the elements mingling with one another disruptively, the delicate balance a repulsion-based move required was unfeasible.

““Clypeus!””

Nanao and Yuri quickly threw up walls on either side of their foes, trying to limit their movement options. The Valois duo attempted to back off a step and spin out to the flanks, but that was predictable; Nanao and Yuri charged forward, using spells to drive their opponents to the corners of the ring. Much of the Koutz school’s strengths were lost without space to maneuver in; getting trapped in a corner was the last thing any of them wanted.

“Urghhhh!”

“Your response is simplistic, Ms. Valois!”

She’d taken a step to help them out, but now Oliver himself came swinging in, locking her down. She tried to deflect and brush past, but he predicted that and altered the flow of her force. Valois went spinning clockwise, giving him the positional advantage. Fancy Floating footwork was her bread and butter, yet turning that against her made her easy to manipulate. Her teammates had been behind her, but now Oliver was between her and them, making it even harder for Valois to assist.

“If your brains are linked, your mind-controlled teammates are only capable of making the same decisions you would! Your synergy gains are offset by a fatal lack of variety! That’s the penalty for robbing a mage of their individuality!”

“_____!”

“We’re doing the opposite! I might be nominally the leader, but this team has no strict chain of command! If any one of us makes a move, the other two can back it up as they see fit! You ought to know that! A mage’s battles are ever against the unknown, and what matters most is not your initial plan but your ability to improvise!”

Now Oliver was on the offensive, physically and verbally. It sent shock waves through Valois, but still she refused to relinquish control over her teammates. They dashed backward to the edges of the ring, so fast that the crowd wondered if they’d ring themselves out—but then they began Wall Walking on the arena’s sides.

“Hrm—!”

“Is that even allowed?!”

This surprised both Oliver’s teammates. The floor they stood on was elevated a good five feet above ground level—and that left a wall around the ring. If they touched the ground outside, they’d be disqualified, but running *on* the ring’s wall was technically permitted.

Nanao’s and Yuri’s pursuit came too late, catching empty air—and Team Valois escaped their predicament, returning to the center of the ring. Oliver cut off his own onslaught, letting Valois slide past him to her teammates.

“*Hahhh...hahhh...hahhh...*”

The three of them stood back-to-back. Valois was badly out of breath. Exploiting a loophole in the rules had allowed a narrow escape, but even she wouldn’t dare brag about the tactic. It’d simply been the only means of restoring the match’s precarious balance.

A team in her own year had her in serious trouble. That fact alone was making her seethe, rattled her to the core—driving her one step closer to madness. And she had no teammates to help reel her back in. She herself had reduced them to mindless puppets. All alone with her dolls.

Nanao gave her a look of pity. “I can hardly bear to watch,” she said.

The Azian girl had born witness to many a mage’s way of life since her admission to this institution. Some she’d respected, others she’d feared. But the mage before her inspired only sorrow.

“Control and obedience,” she echoed. “You spoke of those as if they were the natural state of man. I offer no argument against that concept; even in my own country, the samurai have long risked life and limb in service of their liege. Yet, at the same time, we had a saying. ‘A warrior will die for one who knows them.’ However high a liege’s birth, however elegantly they profess their ambitions—we cannot fully dedicate ourselves to a master who does not truly see us.”

Valois’s shoulders shook. Nanao’s eyes were piercing, allowing her

opponent no escape. And her speech went on.

“How well do you know the companions whose hearts you’ve stolen? What do they feel, what do they lament, what do they desire? Can you answer me that?”

Valois spoke not a word. But silence would not let her escape this query. Nanao waited for a reply, and that proved too much to bear. Her breath grew ragged; her gaze wavered.

“I spy fear within thine eyes.”

That quiet proclamation made Valois stop breathing entirely. Nanao had broken through to her opponent’s truth.

“Control and obedience are not your true desire. Have you not merely been fleeing what you really want? Afraid to see them as people? To face them as equals?”

Valois’s vision flickered white. Memories rushed up from the depths of her soul.

“Thank you for coming, Ursule. Grandma is delighted to see you.”

The day after her fifth birthday, her parents made their choice, and Ursule was sent to live far away with her grandmother. They had promised long ago to send her *one* grandchild, but the Valoises chose their fifth daughter for a particularly cruel reason—she simply had the least potential. They did not expect her to withstand her grandmother’s methods, but if those methods destroyed her, it would be no great loss. That was Ursule’s parents’ rationale—and if she *did* turn into something, well, that would be a nice surprise.

“I’m supposed to make you into a proper mage, but my methods are a little old-fashioned...and a *bit* harsh. A lot of children give up along the way. But you won’t do that, will you, Ursule?”

She shook her head, unable to answer otherwise. Even at age five, Ursule knew there was no place for her in the home in which she’d been born. Her failures had disappointed her mother and father any number of times, and she fully understood why she’d been shipped off to Grandma’s house.

That was, of course, sad. She cried a lot the night before she left. But there was one bright silver lining. When her grandmother visited, she always doted on her grandchildren, and Ursule loved her very much. For that reason, she did not want to disappoint her. If her grandmother gave up on her, too, she would have no place to go.

“That’s what I want to hear! Let’s get started. Take off your shoes.”

She was led inside the house, then downstairs to a cavernous basement. The white floors had an uncanny gleam, and the moment she stepped onto them, she slipped and fell. Her grandmother was right behind her and saw this coming—she caught her, smiling.

“Hard to walk, isn’t it? This floor has almost no friction at all. Don’t worry—you’ll get used to it in a couple of months. Then you’ll finally be ready to start learning Koutz.”

Thus, Ursule’s new life began. It was less training than adapting to all aspects of living. She was not allowed to take one step off that basement floor. Walking was impossible, and even crawling was inordinately difficult. And even getting food made demands on her that Ursule struggled to meet.

“Oh dear, Ursule. If you can’t reach me, I can’t give you anything to eat! You’re getting so thin! I hate to see it. Don’t make Grandma sad, okay?”

Each time Ursule fell, getting back up was a titanic struggle, but her grandmother slid off across the floor, giving her yet more trials. If Ursule could not reach her, her belly would remain empty, but the attempt left her falling down over and over again. Broken front teeth or bloodied knees became her default state, and these wounds were left unchecked until she could prove herself.

“Honestly...are you even *trying*? All I’ve seen are these pathetic displays, and they’re really not convincing.”

Her grandmother had an unerring knack for when to hint at disappointment. Those words were always enough to get Ursule back up and trying again, even when she was lying in a pool of blood gushing from her broken nose. She feared nothing so much as the absence of a smile on her grandmother’s lips.

“Oh, well done, Ursule! I just *knew* you were my granddaughter! I’m sorry I have to be so strict with you. Don’t hold it against me—I only want to see you grow...”

When her granddaughter fought through the blood and made it to her, she would wrap her up in her arms and rub her head. Imprinting joy upon the young child’s heart, a powerful drug that gave Ursule motivation enough to battle through any pain. She craved that affection more than anything. The more she failed to live up to her grandmother’s demands, the colder her heart grew. She learned to push that aside and keep going by hurting herself. At first, she bit her fingers, but she soon realized that would make her training harder. In which case, wounds on the inside of her mouth were ideal. The blinding pain of a broken tooth made her mind go blank and was nearly always enough to banish any bad thoughts. She broke them, healed them, broke them, healed them, and broke them again. That horrific cycle became her routine.

“You want to go outside? Don’t be silly, Ursule. You’ve only just learned to walk in here! If I let you go out, it would sully the senses you’ve worked so hard to learn. I told you friction is an impurity Koutz abhors. Were you not listening to what Grandma said?”

She'd been doing well, and her grandmother seemed to be in a good mood, so she'd asked for her permission. Her grandmother usually said yes when she was in a good mood, but this time was a firm no. Ursule assumed she simply hadn't worked hard enough, so she threw herself into her training with even greater intensity, no matter how much blood she spilled. Her body had adjusted to movement on the frictionless floor, but now she was starting sword arts training, and that proved very painful indeed.

"Happy birthday, Ursule! I've got a present for you."

This was on her seventh birthday. She gingerly opened the big box and found a kitten inside, anxiously looking up at her. It was so tiny and cute, the first living thing she'd seen beside her grandmother in years. It immediately got its claws in her. She named this new life Terre. In the language of her country, that meant earth or soil. The name of the thing taken from her when she came here.

She was given a small patch of friction to raise it in, where she spent hours playing with the kitten. Her grandmother smiled at the two of them.

"You like it? That's good. It'll be your first familiar. Train it well!"

Having Terre around certainly split Ursule's attention a bit, but her grandmother didn't scold her for it. She merely assigned even harsher tasks, cleverly adding the cat's treatment to the demands to further motivate Ursule.

"You've got to earn food for your familiar, too! It's hard for Grandma to carry all of this, but for you, Ursule, I'll do my best. You'll do your part, right? The slower you are to improve, the more it hurts your grandma's heart."

Ursule acted like her life depended on it. Unable to bear the idea of Terre suffering, no sacrifice was too great. Furious devotion won her their daily bread, and when her exertions proved inadequate, she refused to eat herself, enduring the hunger with Terre. Mad devotion to her cat was all that sustained her, kept her going. And at long last, she reached a level that exceeded her parents' expectations.

"Oh, good! Simply wonderful, Ursule! To reach this stage at your age—even Grandma never hoped to see it. You are *such* a good girl! This means your training here is complete."

Not long after seeing signs of a pure Koutz practitioner, her grandmother told Ursule the good news. It was the girl's tenth birthday. An intense wave of joy left Ursule positively shaking. She could go *out*. She could see the sun, walk upon the soil again, run around with Terre, and see everything.

"Then time for the last test before you're done! It's nothing hard. Compared to everything you've been through, this is just a little game. You could finish it in one second if you wanted to! I'm serious; it

really is that simple.”

But her grandmother’s next words petrified Ursule. The training she’d endured so far made it impossible for her to trust these assurances. Seeing her hackles go up, her grandmother told her to go get Terre. Worried about what this could lead to, Ursule did as she was told and brought the cat back, cradled in her arms.

“Now you just have to give that neck a little twist. Then you’ll be free to go!”

Her mind went blank. Why was this happening? Why did she have to do that? She couldn’t understand the first thing about this. So Ursule asked why, and her grandmother looked surprised.

“You want to know why? You mean you *really* don’t know? That can’t be true. I mean, it’s obvious. You’re done with that thing!” Then she said, “Listen, Ursule. You’re going to learn a lot of things. Swords, spells, brooms, alchemy—so much more. There will never be enough time. You’re going to be so busy, you won’t even want to sleep! You definitely won’t have any time to waste on a useless kitty cat. I shouldn’t even need to point that out!”

The logic of that was terrifyingly sound, which broke Ursule’s heart. She couldn’t very well argue it was wrong. But none of that answered her question. This was another subject altogether.

Unable to put that disconnect into words, Ursule was left stringing together any phrases she thought might protect Terre. Her grandmother listened for a few minutes, then clapped her hands together as if she’d only just understood.

“...Aha—you had the wrong idea all along. You see, Ursule, this animal was only ever a *tool*. Something you use when you need it, then throw away when you’re done. That’s what familiars are! They’re no different from pens or scissors. Nobody carries around soiled tissues with them, do they? Ursule, you wouldn’t do something that nasty, would you?”

Tears in her eyes, Ursule shook her head. No, she wouldn’t do such a nasty thing. But her grandmother kept taking the conversation in bizarre directions. Ursule couldn’t seem to make herself understood and wanted to scream with frustration and anguish. Instead, she just hugged Terre tight. Her grandmother sighed, like Ursule was being a stubborn baby.

“If you really don’t want to get rid of it, then tell Grandma how it’ll be useful to you. Explain how it won’t just be a waste of time and food. If you can find any real work for it to do, then maybe I’ll reconsider. But, well, I’m pretty sure you can’t.”

Her grandmother waited to be convinced, and Ursule racked her brain for any argument. She ran back through everything that Terre had given her, trying to put that all in words.

“It’s soft to touch? Please, a pillow can do that!”

No! Pillows won’t make you smile, Grandma.

“It’s warm when you hug it? The hearth provides far more warmth.”

No! No matter how hot it is, a fire won’t ever warm your heart.

“It has such big eyes? A crystal ball is much bigger and rounder.”

No! No matter how polished the crystal, I’d never want to stare into it for long.

This went on and on, but their words never meshed. Each argument went over the other’s head, and at last, one side threw in the towel. Her grandmother put her hands on her hips, leaned back, and sighed.

“...I just don’t get it. It sounds to me like you’re coming up with reasons that don’t even make sense. Or, wait... Ursule, are you trying to trick Grandma?”

This accusation came like an icy spear through the heart. She shook her head as hard as she could, denying it, but her grandmother paid that no attention, her words twisting the knife further.

“If you are, that changes everything. It only *seemed* like you were getting better, but you didn’t really learn a thing Grandma taught you. I’ll have to start all over, beat these lessons into you. Of course, that means you won’t leave this place or go outside. You’ll be stuck in this room for years. I don’t want to do anything that mean, but it’s my job.”

Dangling hope before her nose and offering hell as an alternative. If Ursule killed Terre, then she could go out—if she didn’t, she was stuck in this basement. And she had to choose. Did she want to go out? Of course she did. She’d lost track of how long she’d wanted to be outside and see the sun again. How she’d dreamed about that all those nights she’d huddled up, trying to sleep on an empty stomach.

But if Terre wasn’t with her?

If abandoning this warmth was the cost of achieving that goal?

Huge tears rolled down Ursule’s cheeks. It felt like she was being crushed inside. The warmth drained from her grandmother’s face.

“You still can’t make up your mind? Ugh...I don’t want to waste too much time on something this silly,” the old woman said. “If you don’t do it this instant, Grandma will be *very* disappointed in you.”

A squeal escaped Ursule’s lips. The harshest weapon her grandmother had was pointed right at her throat. She vividly remembered the looks on her parents’ faces when they abandoned her. And now her grandmother looked just like they had.

Her heart cried out. She didn’t want to be discarded.

That was ten times, a hundred times worse than not going outside.

Hands trembling, she released her embrace, lifting Terre before

her eyes. The cat looked back at her, puzzled. The warmth of it was achingly dear. It had been all that kept her going in this frigid basement.

“Oh, finally ready? Good—that’s my girl, Ursule! See, your beloved grandma’s faith is worth far more than any old cat. Not even worth comparing!”

Sensing her granddaughter wavering, she piled on the pressure. As if the voice controlled her, Ursule’s hands began to tighten up, slowly but surely. The pressure on its throat made Terre squirm. And her grandmother’s voice gave her another push.

“It’ll suffer more if you draw it out. Make it quick. It’s been so useful to you, and now it will die by your hand. The best way to discard a used-up tool.”

Reassuring the child she was doing a good thing. That there was nothing wrong with this, that it was the right choice. Ursule gritted her teeth so hard, her molars cracked. She knew no other way to live than to accept what she was taught and obey it.

Her fingers tightened around its neck. Terre let out its last cry. The thin little bones broke.

And it was over.

Like her grandmother said. She’d broken off a piece of her heart so easily.

“Oh, very good! That’s how it’s done, Ursule! You’re my pride and joy! I was worried, since you took so much longer than I did, but clearly I didn’t need to be.”

And the grandmother’s arms wrapped around her granddaughter. Ursule hugged the cold body to her, her hand stroking its head. Her eyes never left the dead cat in her hands. She could feel the warmth draining away, never to return.

“Now then, hand that filthy thing over. You’re spoiling the moment by hugging it like that. I mean, you’re about to go outside again!”

At last, her grandmother pried the corpse from her grasp. Ursule stayed rooted to the spot; her grandmother left the basement and came back a few minutes later with something else in tow. A girl and a boy, both Ursule’s age. Their eyes just like hers, standing before her like they’d been sculpted in that place.

“A new present from me, to celebrate your graduation. Two brand-new familiars! Nice, aren’t they? I didn’t know which you’d prefer, so I procured one of each: a male and a female. I handled the training for you this time, so you can simply use them as you see fit. Oh—just because they’re shaped like people doesn’t mean you need treat them like you do Grandma. They’re exactly like that cat. Tools for you to use up as needed.”

Everything her grandmother said was the truth. Ursule nodded like her strings had snapped. She knew better now. She'd just learned that lesson. She knew how to treat them and how to get rid of them. Her hands remembered the right movements and would not forget. The next time—she'd do it right. She'd never disgrace herself again.

This was right. This was how it should be.

This was how her grandmother said a mage should behave. Familiars were tools, to be used and thrown away. She had not one single doubt about that. No hesitation about cutting them loose. She would use up these two someday and need not feel bad about it.

So why...why...why...

...do you all keep saying it's wrong?

Splttt. The sound of torn flesh.

Valois spit it out, and it tumbled across the ring, leaving a trail of crimson in its wake. Oliver's eyes followed it, and when they identified the object—he gulped.

She'd bitten off her *tongue*.

Blood gushed out of her mouth, down her chin, staining her uniform red. A means to yank her mind back to the fight, a violent rejection of the doubts rampaging through her. The explosion of pain in her mouth grouped up with her fury and consumed Valois's entire being. She could no longer chant any spells. She'd forgotten the rules of the match. The outcome of it no longer mattered. All she had left was the urge to kill. She and her puppets were reduced to creatures incapable of anything else.

(...She's after our lives.)

Team Horn was arranged at three points on the ring, around their opponents. Watching Team Valois from the northwest end, Yuri addressed his teammates via the same mana frequency cypher Oliver used to communicate with Teresa. No doubt about it—their foes were going for the kill. Oliver was equally certain, and that decided his plans.

“Yuri and I will handle the others. Nanao, you're on Ms. Valois.”

“You're certain?”

“If I take her down, the wounds will merely fester. But if you do it —”

Oliver had faith *those* wounds would help guide her to the future. Nanao's blade had that power. The same power that had illuminated Joseph Albright's heart and given Diana Ashbury the push she needed.

“...It’s all in her sword. Her anger, her sorrow, and her hopelessness. Go out there and answer to it.”

“Gladly!”

Once more, Nanao accepted the task readily. Oliver put his full faith behind that. Yuri was smiling and nodding. You could search the whole world over and find nothing more reliable.

As they stood their ground, Team Valois’s hostility rose higher and higher, pricking their very skin. That invisible force saturated the ring—and proved the signal. Three shadows slid out as one.

“““**Impetus!**”””

Spells cast from all corners, focused on Valois herself. No longer capable of casting, she has no means of negating these spells and made for a prime target. If she tried to dodge with footwork, they’d just have to lead that trajectory; if she went for a Flow Cut, then they’d merely hit her while she was exposed directly after. Their primary goal—keep Team Valois pinned down in the center of the ring. Like driving them to the corners, this would deny them the space to maneuver.

“““**Ffff...**”””

But counter to all Oliver’s expectations, each member of Team Valois turned their athames in to the oncoming gale.

“____?!”

The wind hit, and all three spun. Each guided the wind to the center of the ring, where the gales merged, swirling. Team Horn swiftly fired follow-up spells, but again their expectations were thwarted—Team Valois kept their backs turned, firing further spells into the eddy.

“““**Tonitrus!**”””

“““**Impetus!**”””

These extra winds only served to strengthen the gale’s force. Using the spell recoil and aftershocks, Team Valois slid back across the floor, past Team Horn’s electric spells, scattering across the ring. Team Horn each ran after their target, but the winds blowing toward the center of the ring yanked them in.

“...A tornado...!”

The winds they’d cast and those Team Valois had added—a five-spell-strong tornado still gaining speed, swirling faster and faster. It had crossed the threshold of a fleeting magic effect into a self-sustaining tornado. The barrier-free field was only enabling the convergence magic. They should have moved not in pursuit but to tame the winds. Oliver realized his error now, but Valois’s side was already attacking, the winds abetting their force. His side pulled up to fight back, but no blows were exchanged—instead, Team Valois slipped past their flanks and away.

“Hng, they ride the dragon’s wind...!”

“It’s awesome! I can barely stay upright!”

“Stand firm and face into the wind!” Oliver called, taking his own advice. “At this gale force, they can’t maintain Floating! If we follow the air currents, we should be able to read their approach!”

With this much turbulence, it was impossible to maintain the delicate balance of repulsion Floating required. Their enemy were sliding, but this was ordinary Ice Walking, their backs as sails, their movements dependent on the direction of the wind and much less complex. If Team Horn kept their wits about them, they could win the exchange.

“Huh?”

Yuri noticed it first. He took his eyes off the enemy for a moment to turn into the wind—and one member of Team Valois *disappeared*. Only two were still out there sliding; there was no sign of Valois herself. The remaining two were closing in on him and Nanao, but Yuri spotted the trick.

“Nanao, behind her!”

That was enough for her to spot it: a second figure, hiding in the shadow of the foe sliding toward her. Ursule Valois. While the tornado had them distracted, she’d lined herself up with her puppet, moving in perfect sync. Her puppet was not much bigger than her, so it wasn’t easy for her to hide—unless, of course, she was using mind control to manipulate their every movement.

“Tonitrus!”

A bolt from the puppet in the lead. If she stopped to block, they’d both hit her. Nanao made a snap decision and jumped.

“Tenebris!”

The wind caught her, carrying her back, and her oppositional canceled the spell. The puppet tried to follow up with another, but Oliver’s and Yuri’s spells came in from the sides. She shifted targets and canceled one, but avoiding the other required a dramatic lunge—and Yuri had already fired yet another spell, pinning her down.

“Grahhhhhhhh!”

But Valois just charged straight at her target, ditching the stalled puppet. While Nanao was buffeted through the air, Valois caught up on the ground, trying to take a swing at her before she could recover from the landing. Realizing that, Oliver planted a spell in front of Valois, but her athame was charged with the repulsive element. She turned the blade into the tailwind, altering the course of her slide, avoiding the bolt at her feet with the minimal evasion. Now her prey was right in front of her, nothing capable of stopping her from finishing it off.

With her feet off the ground, no exchange of blows would serve

Ursule well. In these winds, no spell could aim true. It seemed certain she'd be cut down—but Nanao aimed her katana skyward.

“Impetus!”

Winds erupted from the tip, at full output. The recoil slammed her toward the ground. Her falling speed greater than Valois expected, hastening her landing. Her blade remained raised—yet, when her feet touched down, that became just a very high stance.

“Arghhhhhhhh!”

“Seiiiiiiiiiii!”

Valois lunged in, her roar spattered with blood. Not an attack of pure fury but a Koutz move, acting like she was attacking first, then using her opponent's response to counter with a Tour. But Nanao read that and swung her blade straight against the rotational axis.

The tornado raging in the center of the ring began to gradually die down. The audience watched with bated breath—and in time, the outcome grew clear.

“...You said control and obedience will suffice,” Nanao intoned, her blade's swing complete.

Before her, Valois tried raising her athame with a shaking hand, but it slipped from her grasp. A gash ran from her throat to her flank, and she no longer had the strength to fight.

“It seems you have failed to discard the rest. Else those tears would not be manifest.”

Valois toppled forward. Nanao caught her with one shoulder, pointing at the ceaseless flow from her opponent's eyes. Oliver and Yuri watched in silence from a distance. The puppets they'd been fighting had lost consciousness the moment their operator fell and were lying on the floor beside them.



“...I...kiyyou...,” Valois whispered in Nanao’s ear. With half her tongue gone, she couldn’t manage an *l* sound or even many words at all. Yet, she didn’t stop. “I’m gohha kiyyou! I shwearr! I’m gohha shice you ah peeshes!”

Sobs mingled with blood, and the waterworks still flowed. A warm dampness seeping through her uniform shoulder, Nanao let her katana go. And wrapped both arms around the girl’s back.

“I look forward to it. I hope to face all three of you again someday.”

And thus, the fight drew to an end. Valois went limp, the weight of the life she’d led resting on Nanao’s shoulder.

Nanao laid Valois gently down on the floor, holding her hand for comfort. Seeing that, Glenda at last remembered she had a job to do.

“...I-it’s...it’s all over! Team Horn met Team Valois’s onslaught with attacks every bit as fierce and came out ahead! A first half spent defending, and that made the back half all the more exciting!”

She turned to Garland for comment, but in his stead, Demitrio Aristides snorted.

“The finish was impressive, but I have to say it’s a shame. If Ms. Valois had been able to cast spells, that last exchange might have gone the other way. But if biting her tongue was the only way to clear her mind, I suppose that’s all there is to say.”

“Hmm, I’m not so sure.”

That voice came from her back, and Glenda spun toward it. Theodore McFarlane must have left the ceiling at some point—he now stood right behind her.

Moving up behind Demitrio, he added, “Team Horn’s response was predicated on their opponents having one less caster, and that’s exactly why Ms. Valois’s disappearance in the finale proved effective. When you’re at range, the focus of your precautions is necessarily on anyone who can shoot at you. One could argue she intentionally reduced her own apparent threat level and used that to make the trick succeed. Had Ms. Valois been in prime condition, no one would ever have taken their eyes off her.”

Theodore was answering all Glenda’s questions before she even had to ask. The astronomy instructor nodded, arguing with none of that.

“You have a point there. Using Flow Cuts to create a tornado was so impressive, I may have been left with heightened expectations. Had they used those winds to lay down a smoke screen and reduce visibility, perhaps Team Valois’s mental links would have given them the advantage.”

“You were hoping they’d make better use of the benefits of directly linking their brains? I appreciate that, but the downside to mind control is that it gets harder to conceive of such varied approaches. Especially near the end, when Ms. Valois was driven largely by bloodlust. Such indirect means were likely beyond her capabilities.”

“Then you’d say the mind control largely worked against her team, Theodore?”

“I wouldn’t go that far. It’s a considerable feat in its own right. But I do think this battle might have turned out differently if she’d had a teammate capable of cooling her down.”

Theodore glanced forlornly at the three limp bodies.

His colleagues done, Garland quietly took over.

“You’ve explained things well, but as the sword arts instructor, I must give my appraisal. She failed to take Mr. Horn out in the first half, giving him time to adjust to pure Koutz. Those two points are the primary factors in Team Valois’s loss. Dancing across the clouds makes Koutz a formidable challenge, but Ms. Valois underestimated the tenacity of the roots Lanoff sends deep into the ground.”

He pulled the discussion back to their respective schools. Yet, this was also the highest praise he could muster for Oliver Horn. The sheer accumulated knowledge required to analyze, dissect, and strategize against his tricky opponent—therein lay the crux of the sword. His student had provided a living example of that at work, and no true instructor could let that pass unmentioned.

With the instructors done talking, Glenda began her wrap-up. Demitrio rose to leave.

“Instructor Aristides?” Garland asked.

“...The contestants are badly hurt. I’ll help with the healing.”

With that, he bounded off, vaulting over the students’ heads to the stage, where the passion of the battle still held sway.

“Instructor Demitrio volunteers for emergency healing!” Glenda cried. “Let’s call that praise for both teams’ efforts. Dulling spells were at half strength, so these injuries are to be expected, but let’s all breathe a sigh of relief. I mean, this is a hundred times better than calling in the school physician!”

“Whoa, that’ll come back to haunt you when *you’re* hurt,” said Garland. “But it’s true Instructor Aristides is a skilled healer. He’s had a lot of experience tending to children’s injuries.”

“He has?” Glenda asked, blinking at him.

Garland looked mildly surprised by that reaction. “Oh, didn’t you know? He used to be a remote-village mage. He spent far longer looking after the ordinaries than he has as a researcher. Kind of goes against the usual Kimberly résumé.”

“Uh, so you mean...everyone around was ordinary, so he had to be a doctor, a teacher, and a fortune teller all in one? Hard to imagine.” Glenda frowned, trying to picture him in such a bucolic locale—the polar opposite of their current surroundings.

“The least popular career option for Kimberly students,” Theodore murmured. “But if you turn back the pages of the history books, you’ll find a time when that was the traditional way of life for most mages. Living with the ordinaries and sharing in their bounty.”

CHAPTER 2



A Girl and Her Dog

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“Yo, I bought things. This gonna be enough?”

Guy came back from the student shop with a dozen magic-potion bottles cradled in both arms. Katie and Pete leaped out of their seats.

“Thanks, Guy!”

“I’ll take three.”

They grabbed the bottles and popped the corks on the spot, chugging the contents in unison. The bottles were emptied in the blink of an eye, set gently down on their seats, and replaced with a second.

“Downing focus potions before a match?” Guy said, shaking his head. “Most folks in the audience don’t take this stuff *that* seriously... Don’t overdose!”

“I’m fine!” Katie insisted. “I know how many knock me out!”

“Same,” said Pete. “If I get too close, I can always do some bloodletting in the bathroom.”

“Oh, I used to do that!” Miligan cackled, clapping her hands. “And sometimes I’d mess that up and collapse from blood loss!”

You’d think their senior would want to curtail reckless behavior. Guy put a hand to his brow, sighing.

“With Oliver and Chela not around, you two go hog wild. Can’t take my eyes off either of you...”

Katie finished chugging, now gasping for air. “I’m *not* going to faint! Chela’s about to show her stuff!”

Her eyes turned to the empty ring. There was a brief delay before the next match’s teams entered.

“...Yeah, I get why you’re worried,” Guy said, following her gaze. “She’s carrying some shit into this one.”

“Team Horn won the first match. You’re on any minute,” the upperclassman staff member announced.

The tension in Team Cornwallis’s waiting room was so thick, you

could cut it with a knife. During the final league round, the four teams were kept isolated, preventing them from learning anything from their opponents' previous matches.

They were told only the outcomes, nothing that could give any clues as to what had transpired. Yet, in one corner of Chela's mind, she could all too easily envision her friends seizing victory at the end of a hard-fought battle. Relieved, she turned to her teammates.

"We needn't have worried. Are you two feeling ready?"

The half-werewolf, Fay Willock, rose from his chair, speaking to the girl he served.

"Stace, it's time."

"Mm..."

Stacy Cornwallis managed a small nod, but her gaze stayed locked on her knees. She looked rather pale, and Chela knew why. They were up against Team Andrews—a far stronger group than anyone they'd fought so far. But even knowing that, Stacy was here to *win*.

"...Stace, if you're stressing over it that badly, I could go in first," Chela offered. "Get the fight flowing our way before—"

But Fay cut off her attempt to help.

"No, Ms. McFarlane. That won't do."

He went down on one knee, putting himself in Stacy's line of sight. Looking right into those quivering depths.

"Right, Stace?" he said. "We can't turn to her when things get tough. This is *our* battle."

His voice was deep, plunging into her heart. Stacy's fists clenched, and her back straightened.

"Yes. Right you are, Fay."

"I can 'ardly wait! What moves will Fay pull this time?"

Rossi's eyes gleamed like a kid before a field trip. The rest of Team Andrews, too, was readying themselves for the upcoming match. They'd been informed of Team Horn's victory, but all had taken that outcome for granted and had no further thoughts on the matter. Their sole goal here was to fight his team and win—it would hardly do if they blew it at this stage.

Rossi was pacing the room, doing handstands, always moving. Richard Andrews was a rock, not even shifting in his seat.

"Hate to burst your bubble, but not one of us has fought a partially transformed werewolf," he said. "As such, we're better served by eliminating him before that happens."

"I am aware! Just 'oping things do not go as planned."

Rossi stuck out his tongue, the picture of mischief. Andrews sighed, and the big man across the table—Joseph Albright—chimed

in.

“Like I said, if you don’t want Willock transforming, put me in first. They gotta throw up a moon to pull it off, so he’s gonna be second or third. We drop the first entrant quick, way less chance they can complete the setup. You know I’m right.”

“You are. Or would be—if their team didn’t have Michela.”

Andrews’s objection was perfectly clear. And they’d looped this argument before, so Albright merely snorted.

“The eldest McFarlane girl? Never seen her do anything but back others up. I’ve got no read on her true skill. Be honest: What’s she capable of?”

“Not sure just how much she’s improved. But what I can say is, if she means business, she’s absolutely better than me.”

Andrews spoke emphatically. Albright knew *his* strength—and he knew better than to underestimate Michela McFarlane. But part of him suspected Andrews was prone to *overestimating* her—childhood impressions ran deep. He weighed his words a long minute and chose to voice that concern.

“...The shift to her elf form is certainly a threat. That would theoretically make it possible for her to triplecant. But this ring isn’t big enough. And *this* team knows how to move against an opponent with superior output.”

“That is a part of her strength but not the full picture. That aside—with her father running the league, Michela’s in a tough spot. If she’s not careful, people will accuse Instructor Theodore of fixing the matches in her favor. That’s almost certainly why she’s not teamed with Mr. Horn and Ms. Hibiya. For that reason, I suspect she *can’t* use the elf form.”

“You mean she is ’olding back? Infuriating!”

“Sounds like an advantage for our side. So why are you so concerned?”

Rossi and Albright both frowned for rather different reasons. That proved Andrews was not making his point—and given how low-key Chela had been playing things thus far, the reaction was perhaps inevitable. Had she not burned the fires of her talent into him his whole life, he himself would have no true measure of Michela McFarlane.

“If my read on the situation is accurate, your takes are as well. But if I’m *wrong*...well, the difference is like night and day. That’s why I’m going in first. See how they play things. If Michela’s playing for keeps, I’ll hold out for three. I know her better than you, so I’m the most likely to succeed.”

He was firm on this point, and Albright chose not to argue it further. The final call was his and had been since he accepted

Andrews as the team's leader. Differences of opinion were to be expected, and Albright would just have to swallow that and focus on his own role.

"Time. Head on in, Team Andrews!"

The student on staff gave the go sign, and Andrews and Albright rose to their feet as one.

"The heat of that last match has yet to die down, but the finals go on! Time for the second match—Team Cornwallis versus Team Andrews! Both teams proved their strength beyond all doubt in the free-for-all, but now they face each other! What are we expecting from them today?"

As the two teams entered the arena, Glenda quickly tossed the ball to the instructors. Garland went first.

"The key here will be Mr. Willock's half-werewolf form. From what he showed in the earlier matches, that blends the strength of a werewolf and that of a mage—in other words, he's a beast who can sling spells. No one on Team Andrews has ever fought the like, and what he's shown us so far may not be all he's capable of. That limits Team Andrews's strategies."

"You mean they'll be trying to keep him from transforming! But obviously, Team Cornwallis is well aware. Given that hard truth, who will each team send in first? That will be telling!"

Before the rapt eyes of the audience, from the east—Andrews took the stage. But when he beheld his opponent, he appeared mildly surprised.

"You're up first, Ms. Cornwallis?"

The question slipped out. Contrary to his expectations, here was a blond girl, a relative of Michela McFarlane's. Stacy scowled at him.

"...Obviously. Not good enough for you?"

"No, merely surprising. If I were in your place, I'd have sent Michela in first."

"And that's why you're here? Hate to break it to you, but I'm no slouch myself."

Stacy shot him a confident grin, but Andrews merely nodded. Not what he'd expected, but not a choice that worked against his side. If Michela wasn't his first foe, then he would simply take Albright's advice and go for a swift elimination.

"Both sides, ready—fight!"

Garland's voice rang out, and the two competitors each fired a spell.

“Impetus!”

“Tonitrus!”

Wind and lightning clashed in the center. Neither side showed any inclination to close the distance, nor chose an oppositional—they simply threw out their strongest element first. But from there, their choices deviated.

“Tonitrus—Tonitrus—Tonitrus!”

Before the first spells had even faded, Cornwallis was blasting away. Not in a straight line but adjusting the course, predicting her foe’s route of evasion. Andrews had been observing carefully and jumped out of the path of the second, countering another with a spell—but he had no time to catch his breath. Stacy already had another bolt bearing down on him.

“The numbers advantage, hmm?”

His opponent’s strategy was clear, so Andrews took the necessary response. Stacy kept her volley going all the while, not even pausing to take a breath.

“And we’re starting with a furious barrage! The polar opposite of the last match!”

“Both are skilled spellcasters, with minimal output disparity. This is the obvious choice,” Garland said, eyes narrowed.

Glenda took that hint and moved on to analysis.

“Let’s first look at Ms. Cornwallis’s breathless chain casting! You can’t be that relentless without using circular breathing! That means inhaling with the nose while exhaling with the mouth—you all learn it in your second year, but how many can actually pull it off? To my great shame, I didn’t master it until last year!”

“Yeah, I struggled with it myself. Learning to separate control of your mouth and lungs is a challenge for us all. And even once the technique is mastered, putting it to use in actual combat is highly dependent on the situation and fighting style. Compared to standard store-and-release breathing, you’re left with far less immediate air reserves, and that diminishes the output of your spells. By focusing on quantity, your spell visualization is less refined; that makes it difficult to switch elements while maintaining the barrage. This is why Ms. Cornwallis is sticking to a single spell.”

Garland expanded on the technique’s applications. He might be the sword arts instructor, but he was well versed in spell combat, too. Like the last match, Demitrio was in the commentary booth, and he took over.

“Even with those detriments, the benefits of ceaseless casting are significant. Getting three spells off while your opponent casts two—

that's a clear advantage. That said...the history of spell combat is far longer than that of sword arts. And those years have developed cogent strategies for dealing with a spell barrage."

Indeed, despite the volume disadvantage, Andrews was easily handling Stacy's onslaught. Echoing the demonstration on the stage, Demitrio's voice droned on.

"First, keep moving back and forth, scattering your opponent's aim. Bolts that won't hit can be largely ignored—that's the basic casting duel technique, unrelated to this type of spell barrage. Footwork incorporating feints will serve you well here. When that alone won't get you out of harm's way, locate where two or more spells will hit, wait there to draw more, and fire an extra-strong counter that knocks them all away. Mr. Andrews's approach is textbook."

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Andrews's gust threaded through Stacy's barrage, bearing down on her. To muster the output to handle that, she had to take a bigger breath, and for the first time, there was a hitch in her endless volley. A shift that came sooner than Garland had anticipated.

"He's already fighting back? Mr. Andrews's notorious knack for wind control certainly gives him an advantage in this matchup. He knows Mr. Willock's transformation awaits, and preventing that means going all out against this initial foe. The first test of Team Cornwallis will be whether she can survive for three whole minutes."

"Tonitrus—Tonitrus—Tonitrus!"

Stacy fended off the attack and went right back to her volley. She had never once expected it to finish off *this* foe; all that mattered here was to keep him on the defensive and prevent him from accessing his full range of wind spells. The strength of the lightning element was the speed of the bolts—and a head-on barrage took advantage of that. Rather than trying to out-read or outmaneuver her opponent, Stacy's plan was to keep her foe from doing either.

"Clypeus."

Yet, Andrews knew exactly what she was after. He kept his composure until he got his chance to strike back, then took a step to change things in his favor: a blockade spell to alter the shape of the rock in the center, erecting a pillar—the first obstruction between them.

"Tonitrus—Tonitrus—Tonitrus!"

The pillar blocked them both; neither could aim at their opponent. Stacy quickly started moving clockwise around it, arcing her shots, but still Andrews did not return fire. Instead, he lunged himself forward,

directly toward the central pillar.

“Impetus!”

He unleashed a gale on approach, which hit the pillar and *split it in two*, then slipped around the other side. Dual wind blades came at Stacy, and she broke off her barrage, clicking her tongue. The wind element’s projectiles were simplistic and slower than her lightning element, but *this* was their strength, and Andrews had used it to take a shot despite the obstruction.

“Tonitrus! Frigor!”

Stacy dodged the blade to the right, hit the other with a spell, and followed that with a burst spell aimed at the pillar itself—hoping to reestablish line of sight, but obviously Andrews had anticipated that response. As the pillar crumbled, he’d already taken aim, going for a blast at his maximum output.

“Impet—”

But before the spell left his lips, he realized the air around him was oddly dark. Sensing danger, he instantly switched up the spell’s visualization and changed targets, pointing his athame at the remnants of the pillar.

“Impetus!”

“Tonitrus!”

Winds rose from the floor, deflecting Stacy’s spell and snatching away the rubble to lift it above Andrews’s head. As they did, the thundercloud poised above him dropped a bolt like a guillotine.

“...!”

His skin crackled. The bolt hit the rubble and sparks sprayed, raining down on him. Before he could recover, Stacy’s barrage resumed, and he was forced to back away, handling that. As his emotions settled, Andrews scolded himself: *Don’t get careless*. If he’d noticed a second later, the match would have ended there.

“Ooh. That wasn’t a bad setup at all,” Godfrey said, observing from the stands.

Fellow Watch member Lesedi Ingwe nodded. “Put the cloud together with spatial magic slowly so he wouldn’t sense it, then attack from the fore, timed with the bolt from above. Her barrage also helped keep him from looking up. Taking advantage of the high ceilings here.”

Stacy wasn’t just using suppressing fire to keep him from doing anything; she was also prepping traps of her own. Lesedi was legitimately impressed. The advice she’d given in the Rivermoore fight had born fruit—but perhaps that thought was just a mentor’s conceit.

“Yet, Mr. Andrews spotted it in time. Time enough to waft the

rumble upward and still handle the attack from the fore,” Godfrey noted. “Good situational awareness and an astonishing knack for switching the visualization of a spell on the fly. No gaps in his offense or defense, good at backing up his team—he’s one I’d love to have on the Watch.”

“Anyone good with wind’s an asset to my poisonings! Should we toss him an invite? I’m starting to realize maybe threats shouldn’t always be my first approach. And as cute as I am, all I gotta do is put my arm in his and he’s a goner!”

“Wait! Let’s not get hasty. I’ll broach the subject. You stay out of it!”

Godfrey swiftly quashed the flames of Tim’s unfounded confidence. Lesedi smirked and turned her eyes to the match again.

Stacy was back at her chain casting barrage, and Andrews back on defense. The match remained a ranged shoot-out. Neither side ever stopped jostling, but neither did they gain a clear advantage.

The thundercloud sneak attack had made Andrews cautious. Stacy had placed the cloud quite high, so he was forced to regularly glance up—and those moments delayed his reactions to her onslaught. It wasn’t a one-off deception but a vital part of her strategy, forcing him to change how he fought. He was impressed by how well she’d planned.

“You’re far cleverer than I’d given you credit for. But you aren’t the only one laying foundations.”

He hadn’t simply been admiring her schemes. Andrews fired a gust though her barrage, and Stacy tried to jump out of its path—but her foot caught on something.

“.....?!”

Stacy glanced down, wondering what had tripped her up. At first, everything looked ordinary...but then she saw a colorless swirl clutching her ankle.

An Air Pocket. Like Grave Soil, this was a binding move, and one Andrews had been placing around the ring as they fought. The well-maintained arena had little to no dust in it, making it hard to spot the swirls—and even worse, the mini tornadoes were turning very slowly. Since they’d been gradually circling the center of the arena, it hadn’t been hard for him to guess where Stacy might eventually tread.

“Impetus!”

Andrews dashed forward, firing a gust at his immobilized opponent. Unable to defend at barrage strength, she was forced to switch to standard breathing. But taking that breath delayed her cast. Andrews had closed the gap—at this range, she couldn’t chant in time

to block his next spell. She got her foot out of the Air Pocket and backed off, trying to maintain distance.

“Ah—”

But she soon found herself backed into a corner of the ring, nowhere to run on either side. A moment of hesitation, and Andrews mercilessly went for the kill.

“Fortis Impetus!”

A perfectly timed doublecant. The terrain left her unable to dodge, and she didn’t have time to summon the force to blast back. Stacy was at her wit’s end, and the relentless wings grabbed hold—

“One beat too late.”

The harsh voice of his teammate hit Andrews’s back. He soon knew why. Where he’d expected to see a defeated opponent, he saw two foes with athames held high.

“...That was close, Stace,” her servant said.

“Shush,” the girl snapped. “I was minding the time.”

Two simultaneous singlecants to push back the winds—the second from a newcomer, Fay Willock.

“And the match hits the three-minute mark!” Glenda yelled, glancing at the timekeeper. “Ms. Cornwallis was literally backed into a corner, but her teammate’s arrival kept her in the game—just barely.”

The uncanny timing had the whole audience on their feet. Garland smiled down at the fighters below.

“Good tenacity. Both made solid use of placeable spells, making for a highly technical fight. Mr. Andrews couldn’t quite close the deal in time. This should shake things up considerably.”

He’d been one step from ending the fight. But Andrews accepted that fact and backed off readily. Joseph Albright caught up with him in the center of the ring, cracking his neck.

“Can’t back ’em into *their* corner. If she’d been on our side, I’d have blasted her first.”

“Sorry. With the time limit, I couldn’t afford to be picky.”

A harsh reprimand, but Andrews took it in stride, owning the error. The rules stated that new fighters must enter from their side of the ring, so Albright had been unable to join the fray immediately. Half dumb luck, but Stacy had also consciously tried to stay on the eastern side as the three-minute mark drew near. Picking up on that, Fay had been ready to leap in. The result: They’d handled the doublecant in the nick of time.

Albright left it to a single gripe and focused on the enemy at hand.

They'd fielded Stacy Cornwallis first, followed by Fay Willock—not at all the order they'd expected. Which seemed significant.

“...They've got something to prove,” Albright muttered.

He could tell this wasn't a strategic rationale. There was no practical reason to keep Michela McFarlane sidelined like this. If they were choosing the thornier path, it must've been for some personal reason, and thus there was no use wondering what they were planning.

As Gnostic Hunters do, Albright put that noise out of his mind. An organized battlefield, the information he needed plain as day.

“I'll lead,” he said, facing his opponents. “Crush 'em before he transforms.”

“Noted. **Impetus!**”

Albright dove on in, and Andrews backed that with a spell. It split around his back and came together on the other side, advancing like a wall of wind pressure. No lethal force, all visualization devoted to the push. A choice derived from their opponents' position. No need to cut them up or beat them down—all he needed to do was push them off the ring's edge, and the match would end.

“Too slow.”

But Fay moved faster than anyone expected. Before the winds even rejoined, he was right on Albright, swinging his athame with all that momentum behind it.

“How?!”

“AWOOOOOOOOO!”

An assault out of nowhere, and Albright was forced to turn, deflecting the blow. As he did, Stacy floated past his eyes, one hand clutching Fay's collar tight, dragged along in his wake. While Andrews gaped, they got around his side, escaping the edge of the ring and winding up in the center.

“.....! You hurt, Albright?”

“No. But what happened? He's already shifted?”

Andrews was braced for anything, and Albright joined him, looking baffled. To both their minds, that escape shouldn't have been possible. Not just the sheer speed of Fay's charge but the fact that he'd done so dragging Stacy with him. Not a feat possible by simply lessening the burden with gravity control. It required the carrier to have beyond-human leg strength.

The answer to their question lay before their very eyes. A face noticeably wilder than the default, trouser legs bulging with muscles, a skeletal structure altered from the waist down. Fay Willock possessed three distinct signs he was no longer fully human. Which forced Andrews to a conclusion he voiced with genuine awe.

“...They've streamlined the transformation process?”

“Now the *real* fight begins. Get ‘em, Fay!”

At his master’s order, Fay broke into a run. Explosive speed, sharp cornering—one slip and they’d lose sight of him. Albright was no fool, though—he was not letting his eyes follow this foe. He kept his sights wide open, registering only Fay’s general position. That did not change no matter how much he scampered around. All Albright need do was pin down the direction of his final approach.

“Frigus!”

The moment his foe moved to attack, he pointed his athame that way and dropped a wall of frigid air in his path. Classic approach to dealing with nimble beasts. The only problem: He wasn’t up against a mere animal.

“Flamma!”

Fay simply cast a spell at the chilly obstruction. Much of his mana was siphoned into his enhanced legs, so his spell output was far less than in human form. Not enough for a cancelation, but that had never been the goal. He compensated for the reduced output by narrowing the focus, casting a flaming spear that punched a hole in the wintry barrier—perhaps a foot in diameter. Fay adopted a diver’s form, hurling himself through it.

“Hng—?!”

Albright snapped his athame up against the incoming blade. But his feet weren’t braced for the hit, and his block proved no match for the momentum of Fay’s lunge. Competing on force would be foolish, so he deflected the force diagonally, and inertia carried his foe to the rear. Fay landed on both feet behind Albright, and Andrews turned his blade that way—

“Tonitrus!”

But Stacy had her servant covered. Andrews was forced to shift his spell’s aim to cancel the incoming bolt. And that was time enough for Fay to get back up to speed. Recovering his stance, Albright scowled.

“A meld of animalistic dexterity and human combat techniques. So this is the strength of a half-werewolf.”

“AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

“They’ve streamlined the transformation process? If they managed that on their own, I might consider being impressed.”

An arrogant pronouncement from the stands. Beauty the envy of any statue, marred by the dramatic scarring left by a burn. Leoncio Echevalria, head of the old student council faction—chief rivals to Godfrey’s Campus Watch.

“A wonder, to be sure,” said the elf seventh-year Khiirgi Albschuch, her smile most dour. “Mages have dissected countless

werewolves without ever pinning down the mechanism behind the transformation. It's a research theme far beyond the reach of the lower forms. Percy, what do you make of it?"

She turned the question to Percival Whalley, their candidate for student body president.

"...Magical biology that advanced is not my field," he said, glaring at her. "But if I had to speculate regardless—Mr. Willock is no purebred werewolf but a half-werewolf *mage*. A fact that likely lent wind to their sails."

A guarded answer, choosing his words carefully. The seventh-year next to him—the Barman, Gino Beltrami—nodded in agreement.

"If the subject of your research is himself a mage, there are approaches only mages can muster, like the sharing of visualizations. We know the sight of the moon triggers the transformation, and it's likely that the subject's perceptions of that moment play a vital role. If they can bypass that perceptual obstacle, we might see this sort of leap."

Gino's eyes were locked on the fighters below. A girl from a storied mage house influenced by the McFarlanes, along with a half-werewolf boy whose past was likely full of suffering. Not a pairing you saw every day around town. Especially not with a bond as deep as theirs.

"I'd wager mages have studied the topic from this angle before. But a half-werewolf's transformation is accompanied by considerable pain. Forcing it upon them irrevocably diminishes their motivation, yet the research itself requires enthusiastic participation. It cannot be completed without genuine trust between researcher and subject. These two might well be the first mages in history to achieve that prerequisite."

Werewolf movements naturally resembled those of actual wolves, with the added bonus of being able to shift freely between quadrupedal and bipedal mobility. In Fay's case, he added to that the options his life as a mage had provided. Balance control, walking and running methods, even sword arts techniques.

"AWOOOOOOOOO!"

The result was like a wolf with a sword. He could go further than any low stance, slashing from a posture mere inches above the ground, yet without ever leaving himself exposed post-attack. He didn't even *need* to right himself; he could maintain his top speed with his palms on the floor. To prevent it hobbling his four-legged mode, he had his athame fixed to his palm in a reverse grip and merely needed to grasp the hilt at the moment of attack. Casting spells did

require a shift to a forward grip, but he had practiced that motion ad infinitum.

Rossi was no stranger to rolling into a leg slash, but his version was intended as a surprise attack. In Fay's case, this was simply his standard fighting style, a natural derivation from his physical capabilities.

"Tch...!"

"Impetus!"

When the stance height was so different from humans, it was tough to fence with on sight. Andrews and Albright grasped that immediately and quickly switched strategies from versus man to versus beast. Andrews baited a charge at his shins, dodged, and fired a wind cutter at Fay's retreating back. A nice broad range, designed to hit even if he tried to dodge.

"Prohibere!"

But Fay made *no* evasive moves. Instead, he spun his athame around and did a forward flip, casting a spell into the winds while upside down. Andrews's spell was far more powerful, but the sheer breadth of the wind made it possible to cancel a specific section of it. The attack staved off, Fay completed his rotation, and he landed once more.

"Frigus!"

"Magnus Tonitrus!"

Stacy was hardly twiddling her thumbs. While her foes were both distracted by Fay, she readied a doublecant. Albright threw ice her way, but she stepped sideways to avoid it and unleashed a massive lightning bolt. The space between them was swallowed in the electric glare. Andrews saw no way to dodge it and used the oppositional to cancel a portion of it, but...

"Watch your feet!"

Fay came flitting back in. Moving through the gap between the bolt and the floor, he moved his athame back in a reverse grip, aiming to carve a chunk out of Andrews's calf. Moments before it sank in, Albright kicked Fay's wrist, throwing his blade off course. Fay ran off, and Andrews took aim at his back—

"Magnus Fragor!"

Not about to let that happen, Stacy slammed in a second doublecant. Albright and Andrews joined forces to counter it, but before their spells could hit, Stacy's burst on its own. The stage filled with plumes of black smoke. A cloud dropped on their heads, and Albright spotted Fay moving through it.

"Careful!" he spat. "Werewolves have good noses and ears!"

"I know! **Impetus!**"

Watching his feet, Andrews kicked up a gust to blow away the

smoke. Albright ran his gaze around the newly opened view but found Fay nowhere near them—instead, two spells echoed across the ring.

“Flamma!”

“Magnus Tonitrus!”

Different elements, magnitudes, and point of origins—same target. Albright made a beeline for the fire, canceling it out before it hit; Andrews stayed on his heels, handling the lash out from the bolt. There was a cold sweat on both boys’ faces. There’d been just enough range to avoid that doublecant, but if they’d reacted any slower, they’d have been sunk.

“*Hahhh...hahhh...* Damn, they’re tough...!” Stacy swore, breathing heavily.

Her mana capacity was among the top of her class, but three full-bore doublecants in a row still took a lot out of her. Fay’s breakneck pace had him starting to lose his breath, but no worse than the toll their furious defense had put on the opposition. Both sides needed a lull before resuming hostilities.

They regrouped, facing each other down across the center of the ring. Keeping their distance, catching their breath.

“Didn’t expect to struggle this much with you,” Albright said, almost smiling. “A worthy performance, Cornwallis.”

“Nothing would delight me more than you zipping that obnoxious mouth.”

Stacy was never one to shirk from an exchange of barbs. Then she spoke to her servant via their mana frequency.

(You’re still good to go, Fay?)

(Course. Whenever you are.)

Bold words, but the thought of how much pain he was in made Stacy grind her teeth. Everything they’d gone through flashing before her eyes.

“Gahhhhhhhhhhh!”

An animalistic scream echoed through the sealed chambers of a workshop on the labyrinth’s first layer. Her visage devoid of expression—the result of stifling any and all emotions—Stacy faced the source of that howl: her own servant, the half-werewolf boy, Fay Willock.

“...Fay, take some painkillers. That’s enough for today.”

In agony, he was clawing at the floor, although his nails had long since peeled away. At Stacy’s words, his moaning died down. He turned toward her, and she caught a glimpse of jagged teeth within—his face only half-transformed. His breath ragged, but the light in his eyes undiminished, Fay shook his head.

"No...I can keep going. Let me. I'm so close to getting the hang of it!"

"I said enough! Keep arguing and I'll knock you out!"

To emphasize her threat, she pointed her wand at him. He looked right up at her, unperturbed.

"...Listen, Stace. I'm not putting a brave face on things. I'm actively choosing a less painful path."

".....?"

Unsure what that meant, she furrowed her brow. Fay let out a long breath, turning to the rafters above.

"Putting a moon not in the sky but in my mind's eye. Your idea was right on the money, Stace. The experiments we've done have proven this is possible—I guarantee it. But the fact that we haven't succeeded...shows the problem lies with *me*."

He screwed up his face. Their attempts affected him physically, which meant he knew better than anyone what was getting in their way.

"The moment the pain of the transformation kicks in, my consciousness frays. The moon is right there, but it shatters to pieces. That's why the transformation cuts off. It's not a matter of enduring the pain; this method requires that I keep my mind rock steady. In other words...repetition's the only way. I've gotta do it over and over and over until I get the hang of controlling it."

"...I—I know that! But...these things take time! I'm saying we don't need to rush it like this!"

An outburst, almost a tantrum. Fay was painfully aware of the cause. These experiments were making him suffer—*she* was making him suffer.

Pain like this was unbearable even once, but she'd already put him through it more times than they could count. If it had been her own pain, Stacy could have handled it. But the reality was far less kind. Inflicting endless torment on her other half—that knowledge alone was breaking her heart.

"The longer we take to finish this, the more likely we are to be forced apart. Right?"

Knowing it was cruel, he said it anyway. It took her breath away. Her eyes asked why, and he struggled to smile.

"I know that much. Your family's on your case about it. 'You're a third-year now; how long are you gonna keep that dog around?' Worse, I'm impeding their efforts to find a match for you."

Stacy said nothing back. But her silence was answer enough.

"It makes sense," Fay said, nodding grimly. "No matter how much we fight, I can't marry you. The head of the house will never allow werewolf blood into the Cornwallis line. You'll be paired with another

mage and have children with him. I've accepted that. From the moment they took me in, I knew that's how it would go."

His tone stayed even. It was just the facts. He knew where he stood without anyone explaining it. A mage heiress with a promising future and a filthy stray dog she'd been allowed to adopt after a strange twist of fate. Objectively, that was all they were. And mage logic took no stock in what the two of them felt.

That's why he was ready to do everything he could within the confines of those limitations.

"Even so...I want to remain by your side. No matter where that leaves me, even if I'm never allowed to lay a finger on you, I want to be your guard dog. I want nothing more," he told Stacy. "But for that to happen, we need a rationale. Guard dogs have their price. And a stray mutt doesn't offer the value required to stay with you. So I've gotta be more than just a bodyguard—I also need to have value as a research subject. Use my body to give you results no one can ignore."

This was the one route forward they'd discovered. Anyone could serve as her bodyguard. But only he could be her research subject—only that would make the Cornwallis clan accept his presence. To mages, research results were every bit as valued as a fiancé.

And in the near future, there loomed the perfect chance to demonstrate those results—the stage of the combat league. An opportunity to really strut their stuff. Given everything hanging over both their heads, Fay spoke from the heart.

"The pain is trivial. I can withstand it; I can choke it down. But I can't bear the thought of losing you. If I can't see your face, can't hear your voice, I'll just be the same stray mutt I was before we met, and that scares me more than anything."

No words minced, as true as he could be. *Just let me stay with you. No matter what price we have to pay. Please—keep my collar on.*

As he pleaded, he stepped close, and Stacy's knees buckled. The wish the half-werewolf boy expressed and the feelings in the heart of his mistress. They overlapped so closely, you would think they were cast in the same die.

"Fay...!" Stacy wailed, her arms around the one she loved.

She knew this was their only path, and she lamented that. To be with her beloved, she was forced to hurt him—that was a hell of their own devising. An agony they would never truly escape. This specific experiment and battle might end, but they would give way to another just as bad.

"...Keep going, Stace," Fay said, returning the embrace. "That's what I want. When it hurts, I forget to be scared."

He'd cut off all paths of escape. Stacy had to choke back her sobs, let him go, and get back on her feet. How she wished they could cry

and hug forever. But she couldn't wave a wand like that. Couldn't continue the torture that ravaged him so.

"Don't give me that look. You know your guard dog's made of tougher stuff. It'll take a lot more than this to upset me."

Stacy could no longer tell what state her face was in. But Fay's expression was ever so placid. A horrible sort of gentleness, accepting the suffering that was about to resume. As if promising that what she put him through was nothing compared to the pain she felt.

"And when I do pull it off, tell me what a good boy I've been. That's all the reward I need. Dogs have always been simple creatures."

Stacy nodded, then took a breath. She waved her wand and chanted a spell.

"AWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

A war cry that shook the entire colosseum. Echoes of it still rippling through her, Glenda clenched sweaty palms, doing her job.

"Qu-quite a turn from the first stage—now Team Cornwallis is on the offensive! Not letting Team Andrews get a blow in edgewise!"

"A magnificent display. Mr. Willock's fleet-footed attacks and Ms. Cornwallis's bold support fire have the other team locked down. Wide-range doublecants could easily hit her partner, too, but with her control, she can visualize the spells in a way that gives Mr. Willock room to slip through. The sturdiness of his werewolf body likely provides some insurance, but even then—it's simply a jaw-dropping display of coordination."

Garland was being positively effusive, lauding Team Cornwallis's relentless assault. But his eyes were too good to overlook the other side—they were every bit as impressive. Even as Stacy and Fay turned up the heat, their opponents' response grew steadier.

"But Team Andrews is handling it well. They've made the choice to play it defensive until they can read Mr. Willock's maneuvers. Well aware that any attempts to fight back here would be risky at best."

It was clear they were making safe choices to ensure an eventual victory. Would their level heads win out or would Team Cornwallis's fury consume them? Even with a master's eyes, the outcome was unclear. But the moment of truth was swiftly approaching.

"Mr. Willock is moving ceaselessly, bewildering his foes. Ms. Cornwallis is using big doublecants to pin them down. Both approaches are exhausting. This battle will turn on whether the returns are commensurate."

No matter how tough the foe, the longer the battle rages, the deeper

one's understanding of their nature. Andrews and Albright hung in there like they were building tolerance to the cold by plunging into a wintry pond. And slowly but surely, their approach paid off.

"Hfff!"

Fay slashed an ankle in passing. Albright raised a leg to dodge. He'd read the aim, taken the minimal action to avoid it, and never lost his balance. He snapped around and fired a freezing spell at his back, but Fay slipped behind a low wall. Whenever they got a chance, he and Stacy had been setting up these little barricades. Four-legged, his body was so low to the ground that the barricades need not be very tall.

"AWOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

He was out of cover a moment later, darting back at them. That was what Albright wanted. His eyes had already adjusted to attacks below the knee. This time, he was ready to counter it—but when he braced for that, Fay's course abruptly curved.

"Hng—"

A sharp turn to Albright's left. But Fay's athame was in his right, reverse grip—no matter how he swung, the blade could not reach its target. Planning to race on past as a feint? Albright assumed as much and moved to fire a spell at his back—but even as his tongue began to chant, a shocking heat hit his left foot.

"Ngh—?!"

"Albright!" Andrews yelled, spotting the damage.

The first blood of the match. Dripping from the gash on Albright's leg, staining the floor below.

"...His claws," Albright muttered, pinpointing the cause.

Kimberly uniforms were made of the finest enchanted thread, and no ordinary blade could pass through them—but the claws of a magical beast with powerful mana were another matter. Fay was racing off across the ring, yet when Albright looked closer, there were now jagged claws piercing through Fay's leather shoes. A trick he'd kept hidden to break through Team Andrews's defenses.

"Tch..."

"So you 'ad enough struggling, eh?"

But the six-minute mark was here. The third member of each team swiftly joined the fray. Rossi took position behind Albright, mindful of his decreased mobility.

""**Tonitrus!**""

""**Clypeus!**""

Joining forces with Chela, Stacy laid down the lightning. Three blockade spells stopped them dead, but by then, Fay had rounded the wall, renewing his attack on Team Andrews—and taking advantage of their wounded member's immobility. Rossi was in a tough spot

seconds after entering the ring, but there was a grin on his lips.

"I am 'appy our plans were for naught. I was drooling with anticipation the entire six minutes."

The girls hit the wall with a pair of bust spells, shattering it. Turning the screws on Team Andrews, Chela glanced at the teammate beside her.

"Stace, have you got enough mana left?"

"*Hahhh...hahhh...* Plenty! Keep it up, Fay!"

"AWOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Stacy was clearly squeezing out the last of her stamina, and Fay answered her call with a deafening howl, racing back toward Team Andrews. The charge of a guard dog hell-bent on gnawing through any obstacles in his master's path. And Rossi pranced out in front of those claws and fangs.

"So fierce!" he cried. "But this is no longer new to me."

A double feint at floor level followed by a strike to the ankles. Rossi made no attempt to follow this with his eyes, simply letting him register in the peripherals—then did the splits. Rossi's blade dropped down hard from above, shocking Fay. He managed to get his athame up in time, but then Rossi's arms put his blade hand in a grapple hold.

"____?!"

"Now we are on the floor together. Let us feast on each other's eyes!"

"Fay!"

Stacy's cry had a note of panic to it. Fay's agility had been the core of their strategy, and with him pinned to the ground, he wasn't going anywhere. He struggled to free himself, but Rossi got his legs around him, calling out to his companions.

"Do not shoot us both down together, please. I 'ave him 'andled; just bide your time."

"Hmph. Well done," said Albright. "Nail him to the floor."

"Impetus!"

With the trickiest foe out of commission, they moved to press that advantage. Stacy and Chela tried rescuing Fay, but Andrews's and Albright's spells cracked like whips, forcing them back.

"With the third fighters in play, we're back to spells! Mr. Willock's maneuvers may have bewildered Team Andrews, but Mr. Rossi put a stop to that first thing!"

"I've gotta chalk that one up to sheer aptitude. He's using ground fight moves, but the drop that got him there was pure improvisation. I don't know any schools that have a move with such absurdly specific applications. Using his legs as bait and predicting where that would

take Mr. Willock—that takes brass balls.”

Garland seemed half-impressed and half-appalled. Taking Fay out was certainly a pressing concern for Team Andrews, but he could never have imagined them pulling it off like this. He certainly couldn't call this textbook—but no doubt Rossi's stunt had been exactly what they needed to shake up the stalemate.

“But that's often the way of it when teams are evenly matched. They may have meant to eliminate each other swiftly, but six minutes was not enough time to break through each other's defenses. That's a testament to how balanced this matchup is. You can see why each team overcame fierce opposition to get here.”

He smiled, satisfied. The combat league was not being dominated by a sole powerhouse; instead, every team that had clawed their way to the finals was demonstrating that they belonged there. And that made their instructor proud.

“Mr. Willock was pivotal to Team Cornwallis's strategy, so with him pinned down, they'll have to think of something else. Mr. Albright's leg wound does give them an advantage, but Ms. Cornwallis has cast a lot of doublecants and may not have much left in her. How Mr. Rossi and Mr. Willock's grappling concludes will make all the difference—this battle's outcome is still up in the air.”

“Tonitrus! Tonitrus! Tonitrus!”

Albright was blocking Stacy, and she was blasting away at him. His injured leg did give her some advantage, but she was too worn out to force her way past. Too out of breath to maintain circular breathing for long. And he knew it—so between spells, he taunted her.

“...Come on, don't you *really* want me down? Why not take a step closer?”

“Once you're on your knees! **Tonitrus!**”

Not taking that bait, Stacy stubbornly stayed at spell range, casting away. With that leg wound, moving to blade range was an option, but Albright was smartly covering for the injury, and his sword arts skills were high enough to maintain a clear advantage. As much as she wanted to race to Fay's side, she had to stifle that urge, keeping her mind on the spell exchange and waiting for her chance to turn the tables.

“I've been forced to revise my opinion of you again, Rick. I am no match for you on wind control.”

“Your battle chatter hasn't changed at all, Michela. **Impetus!**”

Chela and Andrews were at spell range, too, but Chela had just arrived and was at full strength, forcing Andrews to play it safe. Given the situation, he'd been expecting her to try and force her way

through, but instead, Chela showed no signs of any aggression. Her reticence baffled him.

“Sure you just want to keep me busy? You know Rossi’s got the upper hand.”

“.....”

Chela did not deign to answer. She would happily act as he suggested, but it wasn’t because she’d promised her teammates she would.

Come in third, and lock either Andrews or Albright down. That was her role in this match. Those were the instructions she’d been given, and she understood the reasoning behind them. This was Stacy’s team, and a victory would matter only if they won on her terms. If Chela flexed and turned the tables, that goal would be disrupted. Stacy and Fay were having her help them, but they were ultimately here to show off their own strength. And Chela was clear on just how desperate that purpose was. Hence—she deferred to it above all.

“...Gah...”

And if she was being a stickler for those terms, her teammates would just have to escape this predicament on their own. That would not be easy. A partially transformed werewolf had more propulsive power than a human, but that came at the price of flexibility, especially around the hip joints. Add a technical advantage, and the ground game was Rossi’s to dominate.

Repeated guard passes had him positioned at Fay’s back. When Fay continued to struggle, Rossi whispered, “Good thing I studied up on my grappling, yes? I am no match for you on raw power.”

“...Rrrgh...!”

“Ah-ah, do not struggle so much, eh? I am a new ’and at this and cannot finish things as clean as our president. But I bet I am better at *bedroom* grappling.”

Even as he joked, he improved his position. Pinning Fay’s sword hand to the floor with the arm held around his throat while clutching his own sleeve with the free hand to pull his grip tighter, constricting the artery. Fay’s transformation had not affected his neck or the vocal cords within, otherwise he wouldn’t be able to spellcast. The construction and musculature were no different from any human, and the choke hold was highly effective.

This ground battle was almost at an end. Stacy caught a glimpse of that past Albright’s side, though he was bodily blocking her from getting a full view. She couldn’t land a spell on him directly—but she knew that, and this positioning suited her well.

“**Luna plena!**”

“Hng?!”

In the midst of a breathless spell exchange, when he least expected it, Stacy pointed her athame skyward. Pale light emerged, gathering above in the shape of a pearl. Albright winced, kicking himself for the blunder. The orb was placed overhead and behind him; to aim at it, he would have to turn his back on Stacy. He could scarcely afford to give her that opening, and Chela had Andrews too busy to try anything, either.

“You ’eld up well, but we are done ’ere.”

Rossi was too focused on his grappling duel to notice the change. With the flow of blood to his brain cut off, Fay’s vision grew dark—but just before his consciousness faded, his master’s voice reached his ears.

“Fay! Look up!”

He knew what she meant. Unable to turn his head, he moved his eyes. And his narrowing field of view caught a glimpse of the thing he needed most. A full moon, hanging in the sky above.

“...GAH...”

“Huh?”

Fay’s neck visibly expanded, forcing Rossi’s arm away. No matter how tight a grip he took, it would not matter now. This neck was far too thick for a human arm to hold.

“You ’ave got to be shitting me.”

“GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!”

In full werewolf form, a bestial roar tore out of Fay’s throat. Like he was made of springs, he bounded up. Rossi abandoned his hold and stepped off, standing back-to-back with Albright.

“I thought you were done?” Albright asked him.

“Don’t be an ass! My ground game is meant for ’uman beings!”

Rossi’s retort was nearly a shriek. And Fay had located his prey. He lunged directly toward them.

“He’s after you, Albright!” Andrews yelled, eyes on his duel with Chela.

Albright was well aware. A fully transformed werewolf could not be felled by any singlecant. He’d prefer to match wands with Rossi, but attempting that would expose their back to Stacy’s spells. In peak condition, he could have evaded the charge and bought time, but with his wounded leg, his odds of success weren’t high.

Those factors diminished his options. In no time flat, he narrowed down those options and backed off a step. Wheeling toward Fay, he snapped, “Switch!” at Rossi.

“Okay?!”

They traded positions. Rossi didn’t argue. He turned to face Stacy but couldn’t disguise his surprise. Could Albright really take on a fully transformed Fay? Did he even have a way to survive the incoming

charge?

“GAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Fay’s prey was just standing there. Eyes locked on Albright’s throat, all hesitation thrown to the wind, Fay lunged forward, jaws wide. One arm over his heart to block a well-aimed thrust. Anything else, he could absorb, even a spell at point-blank range. And his jaws would slam shut a moment later. They were well past the time for gambits.

And Albright’s response was equally simple. As the jaws bore down on him, he snapped his left elbow out before them.

“Gnh...!”

He felt those teeth rend his flesh, rattle his bones. Grunting from the pain of it, Albright held firm. Manipulating his internal mana to momentarily strengthen the shoulder, making his forearm a shield against the brute force of the animal’s jaws. This was a futile effort, one that merely pushed back his inevitable mauling by a matter of seconds—but it was *not* without meaning. Those scant seconds were time enough to act.

“**Frigus!**”

So act he did. Put his athame hand at chest height, tip to Fay’s belly, and chanted a spell with as much output as he could muster. The sheer bulk of the abdominal muscles prevented it penetrating to any critical organs, but the freezing spell was enough to chill the beast’s insides, and that incursion soon reached the heart.

“KAH...”

Fay’s body was forced to cease functions, knees crumpling against his will. Albright pushed his weight to one side, dropping him to the floor. Flesh gouged to the bone, his left arm hung limp, but the warrior clan’s heir had won the fight.

“...That’s how the Albrights hunt werewolves,” he said.

“Fay!”

As her servant went down, Stacy forgot herself and ran to him. Rossi didn’t block her path but let her go by—then took aim at her undefended back.

“Pardon me, Stacy. **Flamma!**”

“**Frigus!**”

As flames leaped from Rossi’s wand, Chela spotted her teammate’s predicament. She dove sideways past Andrews’s gale, breaking off her counter to cast in her teammate’s defense. The spells clashed behind Stacy. Only then did she notice Albright’s spell—but Andrews had his wand aimed her way.

“**Impetus!**”

Chela’s defense was not in time, and the wind’s aim proved true. Albright’s one spell had been all he could muster, and Stacy quickly

tore her eyes from him, spinning—

“Prohibere!”

She tried countering the gale with the oppositional element, but her spell was consumed, and Andrews’s winds mercilessly bore down upon her.

“No—!”

By the time she realized she’d been overpowered, it was too late. She couldn’t dodge in time, and the winds slammed into Stacy’s body, blowing her away. She went tumbling across the floor of the ring. Even from this distance, Andrews could tell she’d been knocked unconscious.

“...Not enough juice. The fatigue caught up with her,” he muttered.

The strength of her emotions had not been able to compensate. That had been the cause of Stacy’s downfall. Chela bit her lip—and having witnessed the outcome, Albright let his injuries get the best of him, slumping to the floor.

“Lost too much blood. The rest is all yours.”

Andrews and Rossi nodded. Their teammate had taken Fay down at great personal cost, and they could hardly make Albright fight further. Especially since they had another match later on, after a brief break. No one wanted to wear themselves out when not strictly necessary.

“That leaves just you, Chela. What do you say?”

The same was true for their opponent. Andrews moved up alongside Rossi, athame at the ready, indirectly urging her to surrender. Suggesting she was better off abandoning this match to focus on the next and hoping to reach an amicable resolution.

There was a pause; then Chela lowered her blade, accepting it.

“...I’m sorry, Stace.”

Andrews had expected that answer, yet it still came as a relief. He could surmise that she was taking a step back here, letting Stacy be the leader. And that meant there was nothing she could gain by fighting on alone.

But his optimism was blown aside by a wave of overwhelming mana.

“___?! ”

His sagging focus snapped back to full alert. His skin boiled. Before his eyes and Rossi’s, the ringlet girl began changing. Her well-shaped, rounded ears began to grow—becoming *pointy*.

“I did mean to just watch over things. But I think right now...I’d rather step out of turn.”

The shift to her elf form. Chela was a morphling half-elf, and this was her biggest power move—proof positive she was no longer

playing second fiddle. Andrews and Rossi both leaped backward—

“Tonitrus!”

—and Chela fired a spell toward one, a bolt dramatically more powerful than any before, so intense it could easily be mistaken for a doublecant. Yet, Rossi was not flustered. He’d been through enough fights to calmly read the path of the spell, see it was aimed a tad downward, and make the minimal move out of harm’s way. His read was true, and the bolt struck the floor in a shower of sparks.

“One ’eck of an output...! But sloppy aim!”

He grinned, leaping over the landing zone to fire a counter. He’d concluded that she was not fully in control of her boosted output. And that left plenty of ways to fight back. He was an old hand at fighting foes who could outgun him.

But Andrews’s take was rather different. He knew better than anyone that Michela McFarlane would never leave such an obvious weakness exposed. Thus—he alone spotted her *true* aim.

“No, Rossi! You’re in *range*!”

“?”

Rossi frowned, the meaning eluding him. For good reason: Chela was nowhere near him. Far enough off to easily dodge a spell after it was cast. A boost to output would have little impact on her casting speed or the velocity of electricity itself. If she moved closer, maybe, but at this stage, there should be no immediate threat.

Yet, that logic was immediately belied. In the blink of an eye, Chela was on top of him.

“Hah?!”

He had no time to respond at all. Comprehension, observation, and analysis all lagged woefully far behind. An athame held out before her, no tricks or fuss, just thrust right at Rossi’s heart, the impact so hard, it sent him careering to the rear. He felt himself lifted up, and he saw her form shrinking once more. For a second, he goggled at that—and without moving so much as a single finger, he found himself slammed into the ground outside the ring.

“Kah—”

This hit forced all the air from his lungs, and he blacked out. The silence was oppressive. Unable to comprehend what had happened, the students in the stands froze, forgetting to cheer. At the focus of every silent gaze, poised in the post-thrust stance, Chela exhaled.

“Wh-wh-wh-what was that?!” Glenda cried. “She was way outside one-step, one-spell range but somehow knocked Mr. Rossi right out of the ring! S-seriously, I don’t even get what I just saw. How is that possible? A superspeed thrust from range?”

“...Another type of Floating,” Garland growled as the crowd began to roar. He sounded less impressed than *unnerved*.

“The fundamental process is the same as Ms. Valois demonstrated in the last match. But the application of it is unrelated. Ms. Valois used Floating to make her movements unreadable, while Ms. McFarlane used the same technique for propulsion. The bolt before it was no attack; she was laying down a lane of the repulsive element, one leading directly to her opponent. Compared to Floating that matches the existing ground, this gives you maximum repulsion in your favored element.”



This was the nature of the enigma that assaulted Rossi. When he'd read the path of the spell and made the minimal dodge, he'd already bought a one-way ticket to the defeat Chela had in store for him. Naturally, Garland had no intention of placing any of the blame on Rossi. It was absurd to ask any third-year to dodge that sight unseen. It was a feat beyond mortal ken.

"A Rizett Secret: Etincelle. It's easy enough to explain the logic aloud, but that is purely theoretical. Both the acceleration of a step forward with maximized balance control and the propulsion of the Floating repulsion—that speed is only achievable with a high-level blend of each. It's equivalent to turning oneself into a cannonball. The slightest error in the process and you'll be hurtling in the wrong direction entirely."

Even as he spoke, Garland thought it was a miracle that *hadn't* happened. The move Chela had pulled off was not just beyond the lower forms, it was beyond anything they expected of a *student*. It was not the product of mere talent but of the unnatural, the downright uncanny. Words used to describe Garland himself—but even Garland could never have reached that level at her age.

"To my knowledge, no mage has ever pulled it off in their teens. I imagine we could turn back the pages of magical history and never find the like...until she proved it possible."

".....!"

After knocking Rossi clean out of the ring, Chela quietly turned on her heel, walking toward the sole remaining opponent. Electricity crackled in the air around her. Andrews swallowed hard. He could feel his heart sinking, yet there was a strained smile on his face.

"Reminds me of the first time we met..."

Visions of that memory overlaid the scene.

His parents had taken him to the McFarlane mansion, and from the moment they'd met, his position had been exactly as it was now. The adults had suggested it might be fun to show off their spells—and that had been enough to destroy the boy's burgeoning confidence.

He was nothing but a vastly inferior version of this girl. A brutal blow to his developing sense of self, it had for years been a curse that hounded him. Chela insisted they were equals, that she just wanted to be friends, but he had long averted his eyes from that plea. Because he, of all people, could not accept the truth.

His lineage was not the sort that allowed him to merely discard pride. The conflict festered within and led him to prove his strength against *others*. Protecting his ego by putting Michela McFarlane out of sight and out of mind. And as his ego grew, it became a twisted way

of life. He fought only those he *knew* he could beat, always fleeing those superior to him. Even admitting that truth was suffering—yet, he clung to it with an unconscious need. Until one day.

“...I knew it. You were better than me then, and you’re better now.”

“Rick.”

“And yet!”

He steeled his nerves, talking over her. He was done running. Like the girl who’d gone up against a garuda while not even capable of casting a satisfactory spell. Like the boy who’d stood there, shoulder to shoulder with her. Richard Andrews wanted to be like *them*. They’d called him a comrade, and he aimed to live up to that. When that truly came to pass, for the first time, he would stand proud and be the man he longed to be. Thus:

“There is one thing that’s different. I am no longer turning away. Not from you, and not from my own weakness,” he said. “This is my answer: Come at me, Chela!”

With everything he had, the boy aimed his wand at his old friend. He cut down the part of his heart screaming that he should turn and run, that he stood no chance at victory. She was far stronger than anyone he’d ever fought—but for once, he would not back down.

“...Then come I shall.”

Accepting his resolve, Chela struck a mid-stance with her athame. The force radiating from the tip of it alone made Andrews dizzy. But Nanao Hibiya or Oliver Horn wouldn’t quail here. Their images were carved into Andrews’s mind and gave him courage. Overlapping those with his own image, the words of his initial volley were on his tongue when—

“That’s enough.”

A voice from above, like chopping wood.

Both heads snapped up. There stood an upside-down man in a dapper brown suit, feet planted on the underside of a broom. Theodore McFarlane had been watching over their fight and deemed it time to step in.

“Fa...ther.”

“You’ve been quite naughty, Chela. This is not what we discussed.”

He dropped off the broom, flipping neatly in the air and landing before her without a sound. The smile he turned her way did not appear any different from his customary charm. But Chela could tell—this was the rarest of sights, the expression he wore when genuinely furious.

“You may enter the combat league. You may joust with your school chums. But do *not* get serious. That was the agreement.”

His tone was even, simply reciting the terms. Andrews had no clue what to make of this sudden intrusion, but Chela's wand hand shook. Her voice like a whisper into the north wind.

"...I just...wanted Stace to win..."

"This was *their* fight. Your skill has no bearing on it."

Theodore spoke of harsh truths, and her knees almost buckled under them. But she met her father's eyes, forcing out the words as if she were coughing up blood.

"I know that. But...I want to give back what was taken from them. Even just a little of what they should have had...!"

She put her desires out there. Her half sister had been robbed of so many things from the moment of birth, and her father was chief among them. Chela had long wrestled with this pain.

There was a momentary silence. A mocking smile played about Theodore's lips, but it was hard to tell if that was directed at her...or himself.

"That can't be done, Chela. As you're well aware. You're *my* daughter, which dooms you to a life of *taking*."

"___!!"

That word made her detonate. The one thing she simply could not accept, and she threw everything she had at him in protest. A reckless lunge, all consequences be damned, the most powerful thrust she could manage. One no one else in her year could even *see*, aimed right at his heart.

"*Sigh.*"

And it was over.

Like the sweep of a dragon's tail, Andrews thought. Before his eyes, Chela's body shot sideways so suddenly, it was downright comical.

She tumbled helplessly across the floor, not allowed to catch herself, not permitted to perceive what had happened. The blow to her cheek had pruned her consciousness, leaving her senses lost in darkness. The momentum carried her all the way to the edge of the arena, not a single sound escaping Chela's lips. Her father's strike had robbed his daughter of even the capacity for an agonized grunt.

"That's for breaking your promise. Repent in bed for a while."

Theodore stood bolt upright, just his arm raised before him. Chela was unresponsive. Only then did Andrews register that this had been merely a slap on the cheek. From no stance at all, yet allowing Chela no response whatsoever.

He couldn't even shudder. That response was of no value in the face of what he'd just witnessed. This display merely carved one simple fact into his chest—this world contained things beyond his comprehension.

"...And you needn't worry. Those two won't be separated so

easily. Breaking down a werewolf's transformation is a success by anyone's standards and does not require a league victory to seal the deal. The Cornwallis clan may be stubborn as mules, but I shall insist. As an *outsider*, that is all that I can really do."

Theodore knew full well his words no longer reached Chela's ears. But he stepped over to her prostrate form and gathered her up in his arms. Then he moved back to Andrews, passing right on by.

"Apologies for this uncomfortable display. The victory is yours, Mr. Andrews. Be proud."

Leaving those words hanging, father and daughter left the ring. Andrews watched the man's back retreat down the exit—and then turned his gaze skyward, wallowing in his own helplessness.

"...Uh, well..."

Glenda couldn't find any words to describe this, so she turned to the teachers beside her.

After a long silence, Garland shook his head, closing his eyes.

"...We cannot address the problems of the McFarlanes. Sorry, Ms. Glenda."

Glenda gulped. She knew that was the only answer here. Yet, she had still dared hope—the light of the fight that had almost happened had been just that entrancing. All she'd wanted was to see it play out.

Much of the crowd clearly felt the same, and Glenda had to force herself to announce the outcome.

"...Combat league: Match Two. Team Cornwallis cedes victory to Team Andrews."

"Chela!"

"Are you okay?!"

The moment the match ended, Katie and Guy had left the stands and came running to the infirmary. The first thing they saw was Albright, and the school physician treating his injuries. Their eyes soon found Chela on a bed by the window, her eyes open.

"...I've rather upset everyone, haven't I? I'll be fine, I assure you. Just need to rest a bit and I'll be back on my feet."

She managed a feeble smile as they ran up to her bed. The doctor's work had already reduced the swollen cheek courtesy of Theodore, but Chela was still unable to sit up on her own. A blow designed to immobilize her for a while, delivered with the precision that required.

Chela chose her words in light of that.

"But I'm afraid we'll have to withdraw from further matches. There's my current state, but we've asked far too much of Mr. Willock

as well. We certainly can't make him transform again this soon. I'm sure Stace will say the same when she wakes."

"Oh...yeah..."

"After that fight, I'm not surprised."

There were two more beds next to Chela's, and her teammates lay upon them. Neither Stacy nor Fay had woken up yet. Less because of the damage they'd taken than sheer exhaustion. You could patch up an injury quickly, but mana recovery took time. They needed rest above all.

"We made it to the finals, so it's a pity we won't get a chance to fight Oliver's team. Still, the result is not yet decided. Rick's team is very good. I honestly have no idea what'll happen if they go all out against our friends."

To Chela, that was simply the unvarnished truth. To her eyes, Stacy and Fay's plan had been a good one. Against anyone else, it likely would have succeeded. But Team Andrews had weathered the storm with astonishing tenacity, suggesting their capabilities were far beyond what she had projected. She had the utmost faith in Oliver and Nanao, yet she still could not call their victory assured.

"But I also believe the two of them are the cause of Team Andrews's newfound strength. That's why I'm eager to see how they respond to it."

She put her desire into words. Since the league rules required the teams be kept separate, they couldn't come see her here. They likely only knew the match's outcome and didn't even realize Chela was bedridden. She was grateful for that. They were prepping for a battle with a formidable foe, and she did not want her problems to ruin their concentration. Team Horn and Team Andrews were so matched in ability that that minor distraction could well prove their undoing.

Chela could barely lift her arm, but somehow she got it on the bed's railing. Katie was closest and grabbed hold of her hand. The ringlet girl scanned her friends' concerned faces.

"I'll be there as soon as I can stand. You go on back ahead of me. I want you there to cheer for our comrades."

"...This is taking forever."

Following the second match's abrupt end, the audience was left sitting in the stands, biding their time. Team Carste had been eliminated in the main round, and they were sitting with their friend, Peter Cornish. Teresa had flitted off somewhere again, leaving her seat empty; next to her vacant spot, Dean folded his arms, snorting.

"Seriously! Are they arguing behind the scenes?"

"Just how stupid are you? After that interruption, an argument is

inevitable.”

Zero attempt to dull the verbal barbs. Teresa’s seat remained vacant, and this speaker sat on the other side of it.

“Oh yeah?” Dean said, glaring at the girl seated there. “Thanks for the unsolicited feedback. I’ve been wondering—why are you here? There were plenty of empty seats when you showed up.”

“I merely felt compelled to this location. Even if I had to drive off the previous occupant.”

She gracefully folded her legs, her blond locks glimmering. This was the leader of the other qualifying second-year team, one Felicia Echevalria. Sister to the infamous head of the old-council camp, Leoncio Echevalria.

Rita Appleton was seated on the other side of Dean. She leaned in and whispered, “Wow, Dean, when’d you make friends with Ms. Echevalria?”

“I *didn’t*,” Dean grumbled back, brow furrowed. “We did that commentary thing together, and she’s been on my case ever since. Wish I knew why.”

There was a moment’s silence, and then Felicia spoke again.

“It’s a shame the last match was called off. I would have liked to see Ms. McFarlane fight longer.”

“...Are you talking to me?”

“Don’t give yourself airs. I am talking to myself alone. However, I am generous to a fault, and if you insist on conversing with me, I might consider engaging.”

“I’m good.”

Dean looked away, showing no further interest. This made a vein on Felicia’s temple visibly pulsate.

“Dean, don’t be rude!” Rita hissed. “She clearly wants to talk to you!”

“Huh? I know *that*. I just want her to come out and say it.”

“She’s probably a tough cookie. Like Teresa!”

Rita was clearly trying to make this work, and dropping Teresa’s name did make Dean inclined to cut Felicia some more slack. Compared to Teresa’s entire first year, Felicia’s act was a lot easier to handle—she at least talked to him of her own free will. Dean looked back her way.

“...Do you not have any friends?” he asked.

“I wasn’t in the mood to drag around a gaggle of lackeys. Should I need them, I have dozens available.”

“Uh-huh. So what was the point? You wanted to see Ms. McFarlane fight?”

“There are precious few chances to view Rizett Secrets like that. There will be a flood of requests to view recordings of that match, to

be sure. But perhaps this discussion is of no use to someone with zero drive to improve themselves.”

“Nah, I totally get that, just... Would I even follow what I’m seeing? Personally, I’d rather go over what Mr. Rossi did. That street-fight style’s more my speed.”

“Ha, how the riff call the raff. Rolling in the dirt with a werewolf is so boorish. Feeling drawn to that heresy calls in question your value as a mage.”

“Oh, I ain’t arguing that I wasn’t raised right. Anyway, Teresa, which fight impressed you?”

“Mr. Horn. No one else matters.”

The voice came from what should have been empty space, and Felicia jumped straight out of her skin. She found a small girl sitting calmly in a seat that had been unoccupied mere moments before. Felicia hadn’t detected her at all until she spoke.

“.....?! When did you get here?!”

“Huh? She’s been here for, like, two minutes. Too small for you to notice?”

“Once more, the redwood boasts only about its height,” Teresa said.

“Okay, we’re taking this outside. Later.”

Teresa and Dean were back to their usual squabbling. Felicia watched with a frown for a moment, but before she could chime in, Peter yelped, “Oh, look! Someone’s taken the ring!”

Theodore was back out in front of the crowd, everyone desperate for an update on the proceedings. He stepped to the center of the ring, and his gaze swept the stands.

“*Ahem*, apologies for the lengthy delay. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Team Cornwallis and Team Valois have both withdrawn. As a result, the next match—Team Horn versus Team Andrews—will decide the league victory.”

That announcement sent ripples through the audience. They were not pleased. A long wait followed by bad news—angry voices erupted everywhere.

“What the hell?!”

“What a joke—that’s half the fights canceled!”

“It’s just a regular-ass tournament now!”

“So you’re basically saying, *Screw you*, to the audience *and* the league!”

Theodore nodded at every remark. He’d made the declaration and had been entirely aware how it would be received. Accepting the inevitable, he moved to proceed.

“Yes, yes, entirely understandable. But unfortunately, the circumstances left us with no choice. Neither team was in any condition to fight. No instructor here would dream of forcing them into the ring like that.”

The rationale itself made sense, but he had personally interfered with the second match, and that made it hard for the students to settle down. As the uproar only intensified, Theodore moved to extinguish the flames.

“Naturally, this state of affairs is my fault—the abrupt end to the last match included. I stand ready to acknowledge all your criticisms. But I have also prepared amends. I ask only that you hear me out before you throw that burst orb my way.”

The din died down. If he had more to offer than mealymouthed excuses, then they were curious what—that was how the average Kimberly student thought. Exactly as they had when he was a student at this institution. Grinning, Theodore named his “*amends*.”

“An impromptu exhibition match. Held tomorrow, populated by all the teams eliminated in the lower forms’ main round, the victors of which shall receive ten million belc from my own personal funds. Consider it a modest means of making it up to you.”

A totally different stir ran through the crowd. Even if this mess was on the league admins, an extra prize of that size was a worthy bonus. And no one could complain about the eliminated teams getting a second shot.

As the students made swift calculations, Theodore offered further explanation.

“Sounds like you’re on board. Let me explain the rest of today’s proceedings. Team Horn versus Team Andrews—whoever wins this battle will be the junior league champions. The preceding battles may have ended unexpectedly—entirely my fault—but even if the league had played out ordinarily, I suspect those two teams would have been the final pairing. They’re both just that good.”

He wasn’t building them up to justify the format changes; this was clearly Theodore’s honest opinion. The strengths of the individual members were a different story, but the two dropout teams were simply far less stable as a group than the two that had advanced. Looking at the matches fought, Team Horn and Team Andrews had clearly played with an eye on what lay ahead. In other words—while they might be skipping ahead, the outcome was the same. He was sure of it.

“The fighters will return in thirty minutes’ time. We’ll fill the gap with more detailed explanations of the exhibition. Listen well.”

All ears present perked up. Every bit as attentive as they were in class. Theodore launched into the full lecture.

“...I knew Chela’s team would drop out.”

The same news had reached the room where Team Andrews waited. Albright had survived the doctor’s handiwork and was back with them, sunk deep in a chair.

“Instructor Theodore bailed us out last time,” he muttered. “I had no clue the McFarlane girl was that bonkers.”

“Indeed. I ’onestly did not even see that thrust. She could try the move on me again, and I would be just as ’elpless. I ’ave a lot to work on.”

Rossi was sprawled out on a bench, his defeat playing on repeat in his mind.

“I agree,” Andrews said with a nod, his own face-off with her occupying every bit as much mental real estate. “But even if the match had been allowed to continue, I suspect Team Cornwallis would have withdrawn. Those transformations take too much of a toll on Mr. Willock’s body, and Ms. Cornwallis used too much mana on those doublecants. I doubt either had enough left in them to handle the remaining matches.”

This victory had not necessarily been handed to them. Catching Andrews’s drift, Rossi bounded up from the bench. As shocking as that thrust had been, they could not afford to drag it around with them. Relieved he’d gotten the hint, Andrews glanced at his other teammate.

“Are you good to go, Albright? Mr. Willock’s teeth went rather deep; will the bite hold you back?”

“It won’t. The wound’s healed, and I’ve got mana to spare. That’s why I only stopped the bleeding and let the doctor handle the rest. I’ve got enough for one more match.”

He sounded assured. Refusing to waste mana on his own healing—all for the sake of victory. Andrews found that dedication worth placing his faith in. Convinced he need not worry about his team, he focused on sorting himself out. In the upcoming match, he would be required to perform better than either of them.

“However we got here, we’re in the final fight. Eliminate distractions and give it all we’ve got.”

“Whoa, two teams dropped out? What for?”

Yuri looked baffled. In their waiting room, Team Horn had received the final verdict, but unaware of what exactly had happened, the news was a much bigger shock. They could all guess that the toll of Fay Willock’s transformation was to blame for Team Cornwallis’s withdrawal, so Oliver spoke to the other dropout.

“I’m assuming this is down to Ms. Valois’s mental state. I doubt she’s recovered from her defeat yet. That was the kind of loss that

stays with you.”

“It may hurt now,” Nanao said, looking up from the katana she’d been tending to. “But that lady will recover and come after us stronger than ever. I know it to be true.”

Oliver took her word for it. Anyone Nanao faced head-on and defeated would inevitably see the light through that darkness. There was a quality to her blade that engendered faith.

Their new information processed, he turned to his teammates. The final match lay ahead, and this was their last chance to plan.

“Whatever the truth, for now we must move on. We’re up against Team Andrews. They’re by far the best team we’ve fought, both in individual strength and group cohesiveness. Even if all of us are at peak performance, it’s going to be extremely close.”

Nanao and Yuri both nodded. They’d known Team Andrews would be the greatest obstacle on their path to league victory. The first thing to mind was the match where Team Aalto had been eliminated—where they’d fought off two teams at once without batting an eyebrow. Getting through their defenses directly would be no small task.

“We all know one another’s styles well, so we’re better off staying flexible instead of locking ourselves into a strategy. But probably best if we decide roughly who should handle whom. Those pairings will help us decide the flow of the match.”

“In that case, allow me to take on Mr. Albright. I am certain the gentleman will be coming directly at me.”

“I agree. He’s likely the only third-year who can face you at blade range and not be swiftly overpowered. And I’m sure he wants to put that to the test.”

“Then I guess that means I’m on Rossi? Sounds fun. You never know what he’ll do!”

“Your super hunches against his theory-flouting tricks? No clue how that’ll go, but it seems like a solid choice. You’re probably the only one of us Rossi doesn’t have a read on. If he’s forced to focus on dealing with you, that’ll be our most effective means of neutralizing him.”

Their plans firmed up with little debate. Proof they had faith in one another’s skills and a sign they trusted their opponents to fight fair and square. There would be no hinky tricks here. And for that reason, their plans focused only on hitting them with everything they had.

“That means I’m up against Mr. Andrews,” said Oliver. “An opponent that’ll test my mettle. I get the sense that we have similar approaches to combat, and I bet he’ll have prepared carefully to take us on. We’ll be trying to outguess each other on a very deep level.”

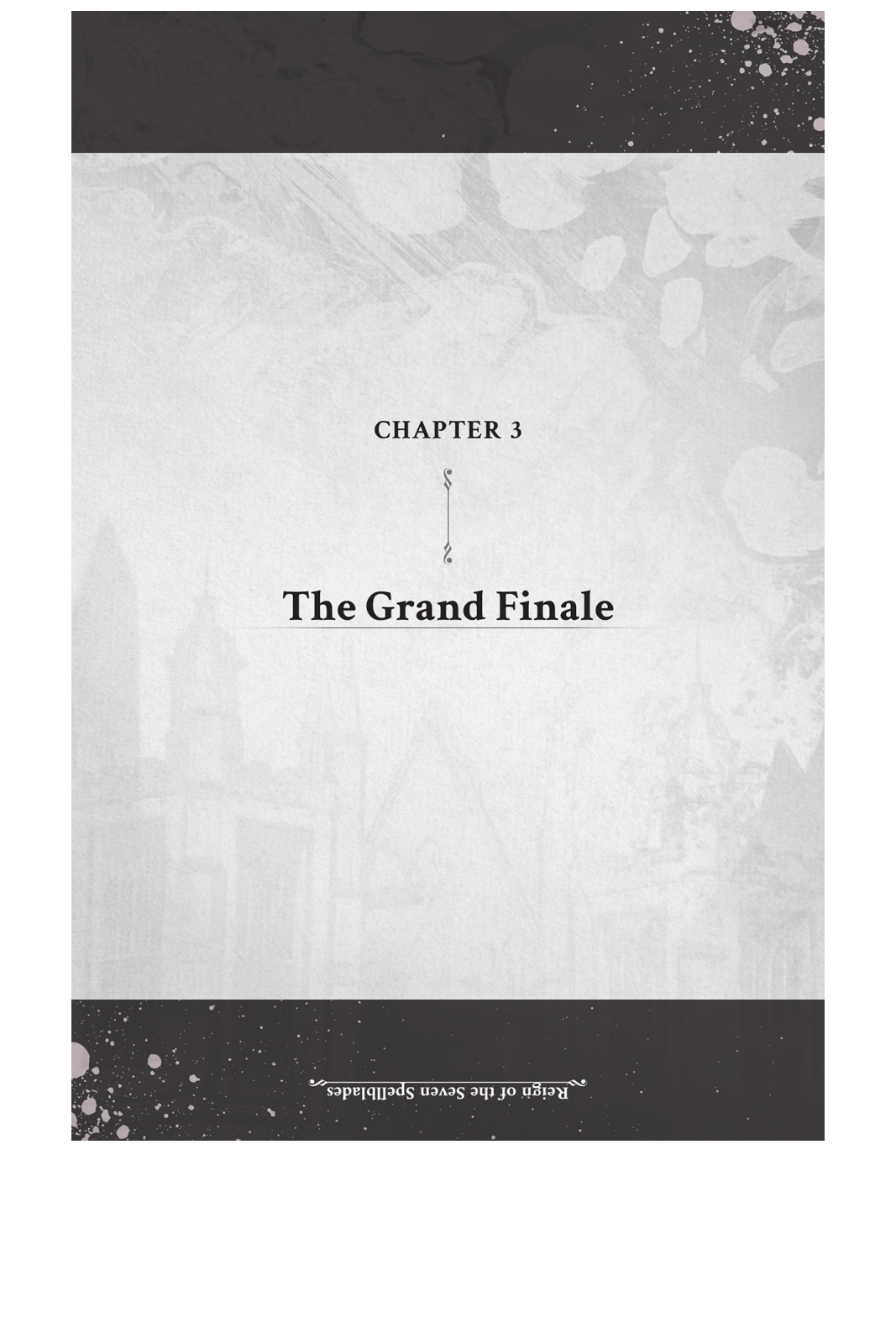
“Then you must simply enjoy that. Like speaking at length when reunited with an old friend.”

Nanao’s metaphor was apt, and Oliver nodded, smiling. He ran back over what they’d said, checking for anything he might have left out, then directed his thoughts inward. A comfortable excitement, no trace of anxiety.

“...Good, then let’s leave it at that. Getting too granular will work against us. Spend the rest of the time however you want.”

With that, his teammates split up, and Oliver checked the clock. Twenty minutes till the match began. Not long at all, and yet the time seemed to be ticking away so slowly. When he realized that meant he was eager for the match to start—well, that came as a surprise to himself.

Then he whispered, “Do you feel the same, Mr. Andrews...?”



CHAPTER 3



The Grand Finale

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Theodore finished his exposition and exited the stage. The waiting time that followed proved far longer than the numbers alone implied. Some audience members sat with hands folded, others engaged in furious arguments about what lay ahead. But in time, all lent their ears to the commentator's cry.

"It's that time again, people! That intervention may have been frustrating, but choke back those tears. One unforgettable battle after another, and they have all led to this moment. Enter the junior league finalists!"

At this, teams appeared on either side of the arena. The crowd went wild. As their faces came into view, Glenda kicked the hype up another notch.

"From the east! Team Horn! Their captain, the top-class all-rounder, Oliver Horn! The Azian sword fighter Nanao Hibiya! Enigmatic wild child Yuri Leik! Together, they're the eye of this league storm! In the main round's free-for-all, all three rival teams were breathing down their necks from the get-go, and yet, they bucked the odds to emerge victorious! And their first finals match put them up against a terrifying pure Koutz practitioner, Ursule Valois! Her team gave them a hell of a fight, but they emerged with all combatants standing! Strong! Tenacious! Never a missed beat! The best of the best, a triple-ace embarrassment of riches!"

She was running down a brief summary of each team's accomplishments, totally unscripted, her passion unbounded by the constraints of prepared remarks. Commentators live in the moment. And that fuel drove her on to the other team.

"From the west! Team Andrews! Led by the master of wind control, Richard Andrews! Backed by Joseph Albright with a Gnostic Hunter's ultra-practical fighting style and Tullio Rossi's out-of-control, risky-as-hell chariot of craziness! In the main round, they got caught in Team Aalto's environmental trap and were forced to defend

themselves against ferocious attacks from two teams at once—but they swiftly turned the tables! The second match of the finals may have ended abruptly, but when Team Cornwallis came at them with a brutal werewolf assault, they delivered a fearsome counter! Brutal, clever, and devoid of mercy! A powerhouse team in the archetypal Kimberly style!”

Having put every impression she’d gleaned into the strongest phrases she could muster, Glenda turned her gaze to the instructors beside her. Like the previous matches, both Garland and Demitrio were here, but they’d been joined by a pair of upperclassmen. Tim “Toxic Gasser” Linton, in a girl’s uniform heavily customized with an excess of frills, and Gino “Barman” Beltrami, his tall frame in a slim-cut uniform as orthodox as they came. They were core members of opposing factions, and Glenda gleefully roped them in.

“We all know the grand finale’s gonna be as grandiose as they get. To that end, we’ve asked a pair of upperclassmen to join myself and Master Garland. Mr. Linton, Mr. Beltrami, each of you is a veteran fighter in your own right. Can we get your predictions?”

The two exchanged glances. Tim folded his arms behind his head, saying nothing; Gino raised a brow at that but took the lead. A pleasant speaking voice, always even-keeled.

“...I’d say the first thing to consider is the similarities between the two team’s compositions. A thoughtful leader, a powerful frontliner, and a disruptive trickster. Both sides’ strategic approach gives their members enough slack to think for themselves, and they’re capable of grasping the opponent’s approach and adapting to handle it. This matchup could easily turn into a very long fight.”

With that, he broke off, waiting for his rival to speak. Tim didn’t argue, simply taking the baton and running with it.

“Yeah, pretty safe assumption. If they hadn’t fought before, you might see some upsets early on, but they’ve all been going at it since their first years. You know one another that well, it’s hard to pull off any jaw-droppers. But there’s one fighter here who that disclaimer doesn’t apply to.”

His gaze turned to the side of the stage, where the teams were lining up. Yuri Leik’s eyes gleamed, clearly not the least bit stressed about this—the singular presence Tim spoke of.

“Even this far into the league, there’s a ton we don’t know about Leik. I can’t even be sure Horn and Hibiya know everything he’s capable of. If anything cuts this match short, it’ll be his doing. But no telling *which* side that’ll benefit.”

“Interesting!” Glenda said. “With everyone else a known factor, he could make or break the match. You think Team Andrews will take steps in light of that?”

“They’ll definitely be on guard. The primary concern is that even though he’s a disruptive trickster, his defensive game is rock-solid, too. He’s only taken one real hit in the matches so far, during his duel with Ms. Ames. And that wasn’t shown on-screen. The first thing Team Andrews needs to plan for is how to deal with him,” the Barman replied. “How would you handle it, Tim?”

Gino once more threw things to the seat next to him, and the Toxic Gasser took it in stride.

“I’d leave him for last. If you’ve got three foes with one you don’t know, taking on the others first is a much safer bet. No matter how rock-solid his defenses are, he ain’t gonna hold up once he’s fighting two or three at once. Brushing him off until you’re sure you can take him is a wise choice. Still gotta have a man on him, though.”

“...Agreed. Mr. Rossi seems the natural choice for that. The other two have bigger fish to fry. Since Mr. Leik’s one blunder came during a sword arts fight, they’ll likely try to handle him in that domain. Mr. Rossi’s tricky stylings have enough bite to reproduce that.”

“Aha. To sum up, you think Mr. Rossi will be mostly keeping Mr. Leik at bay but will try to take him out if he spies an opening...right?” Glenda asked.

“More or less, yes. But the opposite might be true. If Mr. Leik manages to turn that plan against Mr. Rossi, it’ll tip the balance. Either way, that pairing is likely to be decided well before the other two,” Gino explained. “That said, it isn’t the grist of the battle. If neither finds a quick opening, then this is gonna be a long and grueling fight. In that case, which of these six will tap out first?”

Curious about Tim’s uncharacteristically calm demeanor, Gino threw him another question. Annoyed, Tim pursed his lips—but the conclusion was all too obvious.

“A long match means it’ll come down to stamina. Simple math says whoever’s got the smallest mana pool will wear themselves out first. And with these six, that’s inarguably gonna be Horn.”

No mincing words here. When both teams were high-level, mana capacity often played a pivotal role. Dismissing that factor was simply not a realistic proposition for any Kimberly upperclassman. No matter who you wanted to back emotionally.

“Broadly speaking, time’s gonna be on Team Andrews’s side. That’s about all we can really say at this point. I ain’t no augur, so I’ll leave it at that.”

Tim fell silent. He wasn’t playing politics here in the least, instead fully focused on the match at hand. Gino got the strangest feeling his old rival had actually *changed*. That made him even more curious about the match to come, forcing him to split his attention between the two.

“...Then Oliver’s side is at a big disadvantage?” Guy said, frowning and folding his arms.

Beside him, Chela quietly shook her head, Katie’s arms tight around her. The break had been just long enough for her to move again, and she’d made it to the stands in time for the finale.

“That is simply not worth worrying about. It’s little more than a reasonable prediction based on the data at hand. Oliver’s mana capacity has always been a disadvantage, and he has always overcome that. I have faith he will again this time.”

“...But this is also gonna be the hardest fight yet. Right?” Katie said, shifting her gaze toward Team Andrews.

She’d turned her wand on them personally and found it hard to be optimistic here. They’d had the terrain on their side, the assistance of a second-year team, and still been defeated by Team Andrews’s sheer skill. And Oliver’s side would be facing these powerful foes in an open ring. Nowhere to run.

“.....”

As the start approached, the tension grew thick. Pete had said not a word, but now he rose to his feet. Unsure why, his friends blinked at him.

“? What’s up, Pete?”

“Gotta pee?”

He ignored their questions, his eyes only on the side of the arena. He forced all air out of his chest, then took a long, deep breath to the maximum capacity of lungs trained through chanting spells before unleashing the loudest yell he’d ever produced.

“Win this thing, Oliver!”

His voice pierced the hubbub of the crowds, reaching his friend’s ears.

“...Pete.”

“A rallying cry for the ages.”

An unexpected boon from their quietest friend. Oliver glanced up at the stands, taken aback, but Nanao merely grinned. Oliver thought her words entirely apt. You could search the world over and find no finer cheer.

“Yeah, I’m fired up. More than ever before.”

He’d been in prime condition, and now there were flames on his heels. Every part of Oliver ached for battle. And as if he’d spotted that, Garland’s voice pushed him onward.

“It’s time. Teams, put your first fighter forward!”

With that, Oliver stepped up toward the ring, his heart singing. At the top of the stairs, he saw the very rival he’d hoped to see. Each moved with measured stride to their starting locations, eyes only on

each other, ready for the clash they'd been waiting for.

"At last we face each other, Mr. Andrews."

"Yeah...the delay was all on me."

Andrews was here to make amends. Naturally, he spoke not of the delay between league matches. Their history began shortly after they entered Kimberly, on the day of their first sword arts class.

Andrews had picked a fight with Nanao, assuming she would be an easy conquest; it was now a painful memory. He'd arranged a battle in the labyrinth on terms designed to ensure his win and had succeeded only in disappointing her. Nanao and Oliver had gone up against the garuda and won; the sight of that had changed Andrews. Yet, that, too, made him reluctant to rush into a rematch. An attempt with body and mind not yet fully prepared would expose his failings and relinquish his chance to try again—doubling down on his shame. He'd rather gouge out both his eyes.

He sought a greater outcome, one that would erase all the bad blood between them. A victory that would prove how much he'd grown. And until he had the confidence to pull that off, he had no right to face Oliver Horn or Nanao Hibiya. To that end, Andrews had spent his time refining his skills.

His words had been an acknowledgment of the two-plus years that had taken.

"Draw!"

At that cry, the two boys raised their athames. The moment they'd been waiting for. All his anticipation turned to unadulterated focus, Andrews spoke from unwavering confidence.

"I'm in peak condition and will not disappoint."

Oliver nodded wordlessly. Any reason to doubt his opponent was long since in the past.

"Begin!"

Both sprang into action. As if they'd agreed to terms beforehand, as if they'd promised each other they would. Neither holding back, their athames waving in unison.

"Impetus!"

"Prohibere!"

The spells clashed between them, canceling each other out. Andrews's spell had greater force, but Oliver made up the difference by using the oppositional to split the winds in each direction. A first strike that was almost a rite of passage, the natural outcome of each boy's gifts.

For his next move, Andrews had innumerable options. Oliver had every bit as many ways to respond. Yet, each cast practicality aside, surging forward. Blade clashed against blade, the metallic *clang* ringing out joy on behalf of their wielders.

“Shahhh...!”

“Ahhhhh!”

The howl of a stab. The clang of a parry. Fireworks burst in the air between them. Two seconds, thirty exchanges cast and gone. A riposte refrain that would have gone on forever had their breath not given out, but the limits of their flesh brought things to an end. Their timing in sync, each backed away, glaring at one-step, one-spell range, catching their breaths.

“Whew...!”

“Hahhh...!”

Moments *could* exist possessed of this unbridled density. Blood flowing like rapids, their every body part in sharp relief. Unwilling to waste even a second hanging back, both plunged once more into that fray.

No sooner had the match began than it hit high tide. As the crowd roared, Glenda was beside herself with joy. Before a fight like this, she could hardly stop to coddle her cords.

“A-as their opening spells clashed, both fighters lunged right at each other! We expected them to hang back and trade spells a bit, but they did the opposite! Both going all out from the get-go!”

“Not a practical choice,” Gino grumbled. “If they burn themselves out here, the team strategy will crumble. Preparing for a long match means they should be conserving mana here.”

“Don’t be stupid!” Tim scoffed. “No one’s pulling that shit here.”

When Gino merely raised a brow, Tim sighed. He’d have to spell it out.

“The looks on their faces oughtta clue you in. Ain’t no time to be all clever and holding back. You oughtta know better. Right here and now—they’re finally connecting.”

Switching from a sword arts fight to a spell duel also meant they had the latitude for thought once more. When they no longer had the concentration to pull off the furious speed of an exchange at blade range, Oliver and Andrews reached the same decision. Both backed off, revealing a new aspect to their fight.

“**Clypeus!**”

Oliver constructed a pillar in the center of the ring. A standard opening move, intended to block direct shots from a foe with superior output. Andrews’s wind control allowed him to send spells around such obstructions, but he chose not to, instead spending precious seconds eliminating the pillar.

“Fragor!”

“Impetus!”

He intended his burst spell to shatter the wall and push back Oliver’s follow-up. Yet, as Andrews eyed the spraying of rubble, he spotted an unnatural conformity. Thin, cylindrical chunks mixed with shattered fragments—had Oliver’s wind blasted them his way, those chunks would have pelted him. An extension of the surprise wall piercer he’d once deployed against Miligan—maintaining a degree of structural integrity to catch his foe off guard. Team Liebert’s similar wall-piercing shot had given him the idea.

“Impetus!”

Having blocked this move before it began, Andrews pressed the advantage. His superior output allowed him to broaden the gale’s coverage. Oliver backed off, blocking with the oppositional, but unable to block the full expanse, he was pinned in on his flanks. Repeating this could easily force him to the edge of the ring. He would have to act to prevent that, except—

“Impetus!”

Andrews was already casting again, but the wind pressure struck Oliver as odd. If he *really* meant to force him out, he would be pushing a lot harder. That meant the power held in reserve was going elsewhere. But to what end? His opponent had almost exclusively cast wind spells, so what trap could he be prepping here?

And the fact that wind was inherently invisible prevented him from spotting the truth. Thus, Oliver stopped watching with his eyes, diverting his mind to his sensory zone. That limited things to his immediate vicinity but allowed him to accurately perceive the flow of the air. And there were things his eyes had not caught. A portion of the wind was wheeling around behind him. Exactly where he would go if he continued retreating from the spells.

“.....!”

“Flamma! Tonitrus! Tenebris! ...Impetus!”

Andrews was trying to prevent him from *thinking*. Three spells of varying elements scattering his focus, then a final blast that meant business. A gale that acted like a frontal assault but wheeled around him overhead and on both sides, applying pressure to the winds circling behind Oliver from above and below. The air flow intended to force out a flurry of blades aimed at his back, yet—

“Whew!”

Oliver waved his left arm through the central space of this conflagration. The passage of that swing disrupting the pressure, turning Andrews’s finishing move into a mere patch of turbulence. Employing his off hand meant his athame not only stayed trained on its target, it allowed Oliver to blast a spell through the winds, aware

ahead of time they would part. Andrews avoided this via a sideways hop.

“...Well done,” he mustered with unvarnished admiration.

Forcing him to move had freed Oliver from his predicament, allowing him to take the fight back. Once more, they were busily trying to outguess each other.

“...That was not easy,” Godfrey said amid the roaring audience.

Half of what they’d done was invisible to the naked eye, but from their visible actions, he’d surmised the whole.

“Mr. Andrews’s wind control is legitimately impressive, but handling that on sight is a testament to Mr. Horn’s observation skills. He must’ve guessed his opponent’s intent from the flow of air alone, just in time to act, and stuck his hand into the wind-blade generator to disrupt it—a bold choice but the right one.”

“Guessing alone won’t get you there,” Lesedi said. “From how I’ve seen him fight, Horn’s got spatial perception way beyond what someone his age should. That’ll keep most surprise attacks at bay.”

She’d been directly in charge of him during the Rivermoore fight and was well versed in his strengths.

“...How does one train *that*?” Godfrey said, folding his arms. “Like the Gnostic Hunters aces, assume you’re fighting the unknown and make it a part of your daily reps? But what drove him to adopt that practice?”

“Frigus!”

“Flamma!”

As the first two entrants set up moves that would pay off several steps further in, two spells burst in from opposing directions, clashing in the air. Nanao and Albright had taken to the ring, firing from the northeast and southwest respectively, between their predecessors. Less an attack on each other than a signal to Oliver and Andrews that they had joined the fray.

“Three already? Pleasure passes faster than the speed of light,” Andrews said, regrouping and mopping his brow.

“Don’t worry,” Albright growled. “There’s more to come.”

Team Oliver’s duo had struck their classic stances, and the starting signal signaled the commencement of the two-on-two.

“Frigus!”

“Impetus!”

Convergence magic, blending the ice and the wind. A gale filled with razor-sharp ice, but Nanao plunged straight on in. Oliver was on

her heels, chanting.

“Clypeus!”

Curving the spell around her at the floor ahead, she saw the walls spring up in front of her. Normally a lengthy process, but by softening the floor earlier in the battle, he’d hastened the wall’s completion. The spell normally had to soften the floor, then harden it again; with this trick, he’d cut that time in half.

“Gladio!”

They weathered the frigid wind behind it, and when that passed, Nanao’s spell swiftly severed the wall, slashing at the foes beyond. Albright and Andrews each cast to counter that, the latter backing off to play support while Albright surged forward to engage Nanao.

“Hoooooh!”

“Haaaaaaaah!”

Two tremendous swings clashed dead ahead. Sparks like the smithy of the titans of yore cleared, and their blades locked at the hilts before their very eyes. Andrews moved around, searching for an angle, yet Oliver remained planted firmly at Nanao’s rear—and cast a spell directly at his partner’s back.

“Extruditor!”

“?!”

The push spell caught Nanao, amplifying the power behind her blade. It proved too much for Albright, and he was forced backward. The floor peeling layers from the soles of his shoes—but his foe’s added strength came at the cost of complexity, and he knew how to use that.

“Rahhh!”

For a moment, it appeared he’d been pushed off-balance, forced to the ground—but he dove, pulling Nanao into a throw. She flipped in midair, landing on her feet right in front of Andrews.

“Impetus!”

“Prohibere!”

A blast of wind timed to her landing, but Oliver stepped in to cancel it. Yet, there was no time for relief here; Albright vaulted up from his back, the minimal movement to put him on Nanao’s heels.

“Frigus!”

“Huff!”

Nanao spun around, using a two-handed Flow Cut to deflect the freezing spell. Oliver returned a lightning bolt, but Albright leaped out of the path, using the recoil on a wind spell to open the distance. That left all four fighters out of immediate harm’s way, and they each took a second to catch their breaths.

“...You’d push your own teammate? I’ll admit—that got me.”

“But you still had the wherewithal to convert it to a throw,” Oliver

replied. “Not concerned I’d hit you while you were down?”

“Never even occurred to me. We’d both end up down a man. And I can’t picture you ever sacrificing a friend—!”



Albright lunged forward mid-sentence, and they were back in the thick of things. As their front liners exchanged furious blows, Oliver and Andrews circled around them, jostling for position to back their plays. But if either diverted too much attention to that, a spell would come flying their way.

“Impetus!”

“Prohibere!”

Oliver used an oppositional to deflect a gale aimed at Nanao’s flank, but he could not afford to remain purely on the defensive. Andrews had been regularly laying Air Pockets about the floor, and Oliver was making a mental map of these. He fired a curved spell in Andrews’s direction—

“Tonitrus! ...?!”

As he did, his foot sank into the floor—and he found himself unable to breathe. He wasn’t immediately clear on what was happening. His body itself was still going through the motions—his surroundings simply did not allow that action to complete. The air itself was heavy and thick, like honey. It stuck in his throat, refusing to move to his lungs.

Crap, Oliver thought, working out the nature of the predicament. His feet were caught in a patch of Grave Soil, the color alone adjusted to match the surrounding floor—and above that rested a pool of Strangle Air, a high-level trap move. Andrews had moved past this exact spot several times, using his spatial magic to fundamentally alter the nature of the air itself. Wind’s default state was one of Flux, but he had applied the opposite aspect, Stasis, creating a patch of dead air.

The atmosphere should be always on the move. But powerful magical intervention backed by a *very* precise visualization could temporarily apply the opposite qualities to it. Like turning water to ice, this made the air itself heavy and solid. This was the feat Andrews had accomplished. Oliver was standing in a patch of air that no longer functioned as such. And the core construction of human lungs didn’t allow them to breathe anything that did not *flow*.

Had Oliver been devoting his mind to spatial senses, he could have spotted it coming. But the addition of the second fighters had changed the flow of the battle, and he’d been forced to divert that corner of his mind to the locations of the Air Pockets scattered about the floor. And spotting them created the illusion he was abreast of his foe’s traps. Stepping into it right after casting a spell was half bad luck and half the result of Andrews’s skillful manipulation.

“Prohibere!”

If Andrews used any big spells, their passage would make the stalled air begin to move again. This was true of fire, cold, lightning, even darkness. For that reason, as he rounded Albright toward Oliver,

he cast a hardening spell, matching the element of the trap itself. This was standard procedure with Strangle Air in his family; the longer your foe was unable to breathe, the better. Even if his foe freed their feet from the sludge and dodged this volley, escaping the dead air, he need only aim the next spell at the moment of their inhalation. You could not chant without air in your lungs—that was a mage’s most basic weakness.

“Cly...peus!”

Those caught in this trap were inevitably forced to handle the matter with the paltry reserve of living air left within them. Backed into a corner, Oliver’s flash decision led him to do just that. He elected *not* to yank his feet free but crouch down, casting a blockade spell he knew would be far from complete. A low wall, little more than a heap of dirt—but what might appear utterly meaningless was, moments later, hardened by his opponent’s spell. A call made under great duress—yet Andrews’s eyes widened at its brilliance. Hardening spells wouldn’t pass through objects, and at times, that could be used to defend against them.

“Impetus!”

Andrews moved around the wall he’d been forced to harden and this time unleashed his winds at full strength. Oliver had already reworked the air within his zone and was breathing again but too late to dodge this follow-up. The output discrepancy meant he could not fully cancel it with the oppositional. Once more, a spur-of-the-moment choice of spells.

“...Clypeus!”

Still crouching, he threw up another wall. Connected to the first, the joint formed a jagged point—and when the gale struck it, it shattered nothing, instead splitting itself and flowing to either side. Hard to believe that was even possible, and it rattled Andrews, yet his athame never wavered. He kept circling, past this second wall as Oliver freed his trapped limb.

“Tonitrus!”

“Tenebris!”

Andrews fired a bolt, trying to land a hit as Oliver leaped out, but Oliver had predicted this. He had his own wand aimed that way, deflecting the trajectory with the oppositional. His chance to finish things blown, Andrews had to retreat, once more facing down Oliver on opposite sides of the two sword fighters.

“A-another narrow escape! Tenacity all around!” Glenda cried.

“Forming a sharp angle with a pair of walls so the wind split around him,” Garland explained. “Made from the same mana, even

walls like those can stand up to a far more powerful gale. The method's so good I wanna put it in the textbook."

"A burst spell would have taken the wall down," Gino suggested but soon corrected himself. "No, the loss of projectile speed would have given him time to handle it some other way. Hard to blame Mr. Andrews for going with his strongest element there. I have my qualms, but chalk this up to Mr. Horn's decisiveness."

The battle raging for them was every bit as dense as they'd hoped for. With Oliver and Andrews back to spell range, the commentators refocused on the ring as a whole.

"It's really a sight to behold," the sword arts master said. "No one's holding back, everyone's going all out, yet the match remains in perfect balance. You rarely see a match this good even in the upper forms. I hope our students pore over the recordings of it later on."

"The seal of approval from the master himself! These two teams have proven they belong here! Their exchanges have been skating on thin ice so far—and the six-minute mark is almost at hand!"

"*Süiigh...*"

As the battle had just reached a stalemate, the third fighters' entrance proved a quiet one. Tullio Rossi stepped into the ring with a sigh, his narrow eyes sweeping the faces assembled.

"It is 'ardly fair 'aving to wait six minutes with these sights before me? That is not just painful—it is outright torture. My mouth was flapping like a fish on land, going, *Let me in, let me in!*"

That vicious smile proved he meant every word. The boy ascending the stairs opposite beamed back at him. The last member of Team Horn—Yuri Leik.

"I felt the same, Rossi! I had no idea six minutes could last so long. But I bet the rest of this is over in the blink of an eye."

He sounded like he was already regretting it. But when Rossi turned to Yuri, the Ytallian was actively scowling. His shoulders hunched in discontent, his gaze radiating hostility.

"ow dare you agree with me? I am prone to leaving my favorite dish till last, but this time I think I 'ad best take it first. You, I 'ave never liked."

"Oh yeah? I've been *dying* to talk to you! I mean, you love Oliver and Nanao, right? So do I! That means we'll probably be great friends!"

Yuri returned only hospitality. Rossi had half expected his spite would get him nowhere and swore quietly when it did.

"I really cannot stand the sight of you. Andrews, let's go."

"...Fine. **Impetus!**"

Rossi lurched forward, and Andrews hit his back with a gale. Negating the friction beneath his feet with spatial magic, Rossi's body caught the wind and slid across the ring. Team Valois had used Ice Walking, too, but unlike them, Rossi was not using the repulsive element to Float.

With one quick glance at his teammates, Yuri ran in to intercept.

"Okay, Rossi! What have you got to show me?"

He looked absolutely thrilled at the prospect. Like always, he was planning to observe until his opponent started attacking. But Rossi just slid up to him, hands dangling limply at either side. That baffled Yuri.

What's he doing? I don't get this stance. How's he gonna do anything from that? What part of him will set off the motion? When'll he step in; what'll he aim for?

Not one answer came back to him. And by the time he'd realized that, a heel was buried in his gut.

"...Kah—"

"I am gonna wipe that smirk off your ugly mug."

Rossi felt bones rattle and organs shake through the sole of his boot. He'd started with a backspin kick and was already moving to his next attack. That first blow a mere salutation, and his snarl made it clear he was far from done.

"A hit?! No one saw it coming, but Mr. Leik soaks the first blow! Is this the same boy who stood strong against pure Koutz? What's going on here?!"

"Hmm...? Hard to say, really. Mr. Rossi's movements are certainly unusually unorthodox, but to land a hit that clean?"

As the commentators looked baffled, Demitrio broke his silence.

"...He's not thinking."

Garland turned to look at him. ".....? Instructor Aristides, come again?"

"He's not actually *thinking*. From the time he stepped in blade range to the time of his attack, not one actual thought crossed Mr. Rossi's mind. He is playing it entirely by ear. There is no information to glean."



That was hardly the most practical assertion, and Glenda seemed unsure how to respond. Tim, Gino, and even Garland seemed reluctantly to swallow this theory whole. Deciding he had been perhaps a bit too succinct, Demitrio expanded upon his point.

"However Mr. Leik's instincts function, they are a response to information provided. Predictions cannot be made without that."

"So Rossi is moving purely out of habit?" Glenda asked, speaking for the group. "But his moves are so complex..."

"*Habit* is not the word. Practiced movements are essentially the body itself thinking, and the information that provides is far less disguisable than the workings of the mind. Mr. Rossi is instead creating from the ground up. Each time he steps into range, a flash of inspiration generates a new improvisation. The principles his physique have honed are in that instant forgotten, as pure a source as can be achieved."

Demitrio's explanation was a doozy. Tim's and Gino's eyebrows shot way up, but Garland seemed to get it—his gaze turned back to Rossi, watching carefully.

"...He's gone Freed Mind? Mm, he's unrestrained enough."

"B-but wouldn't that just prove his undoing? The best inspiration in the world is just spur-of-the-moment stuff. The schools of sword arts have spent years rooting out inefficiencies, and he's gotta be nowhere near the truths they've found."

"That would be true if those truths could be reached instantly. But let's remember, to know what you *should* do, you have to start by observing your opponent. Fighters with distinctive styles often excel at that, which is why their gambits pay off. But in Mr. Rossi's case, there is *no* information until he's in blade range. This forces his opponent to answer his pop quiz on the fly."

This flipped the entire conceit. Rather than gain an advantage by out-reading your opponent, you deny your opponent the opportunity to read your attacks at all. The result might look like a sword fight, but the moment it began, he was playing an entirely different game. One's stockpile of technique instantly rendered moot, left only with one's ability to ad-lib from an absence of thought. Rossi had honed this skill far past the norm. But no mage honed this skill on purpose. For good reason—knowledge and principles were sorcery's wealth. From the moment you even considered casting them aside, your thoughts were no longer those of a mage at all.

"Omitting the time devoted to reading—a conceptual counter, if you will. And the perfect weapon against a foe reliant on those predictions. That's where Mr. Leik finds himself. His exceptional instincts mean he is sorely lacking in experience fighting foes he cannot read."

Demitrio made this sound personal—as it indeed was. A man of his intellect was well versed in the weaknesses of his own splinter, yet he had never dreamed a mere third-year could find a way to exploit that.

“Whoa! Whoaaa! Whoaaaaa!”

Unable to “hear” a thing, Yuri was pummeled by inexplicable blows. A deluge of the unknown the likes of which he hadn’t experienced since his personality took form. He fought on reflex alone, but Rossi had ad hoc grandstanding honed to a league all his own. Shoulders, legs, cheeks, blows, and blades beyond blocking, the toll mounting. Unable to find any way to resist, it chipped away at Yuri’s flesh.

“...Guh...!”

“I was saving this to go against Oliver, but it would be ’ell for me, too. Scary, yes? Attacks coming from nowhere?”

His voice as calm as his attacks ferocious. Where Yuri would normally answer with glee, today he was far past banter.

“Yuri! ...Ugh!”

Oliver was to the north of the ring, seeing this one-sided beatdown out of the corner of his eye.

He was trying to find a moment to go to the boy’s aid, but Andrews’s relentless gales prevented it. They’d gained a clear advantage, disrupting the match’s balance, and he was not about to let it go to waste. Albright and Nanao were dueling in the center of the ring and in much the same straits. Look away from your foe and be cut down. Neither was able to go to Yuri’s aid.

“I will not guess ’ow your little quirk functions. But you essentially ’ave the cheat sheet laid out before you, no? Someone with the answers leaning over your shoulder, telling you, *Do this, do that*. And I will not stand for it!”

With that snarl, Rossi laid into him again. Blows edged and blunt, backed by pent-up frustrations. The moment he’d met Yuri, he’d known he didn’t like him. The boy’s good cheer came from ignorance, no better than the curiosity an infant shows an insect. Seeing him dish that out willy-nilly galled Rossi, and while that alone might be excusable, he could not bear seeing him gadflying around the object of his pursuit since year one.

Yuri Leik made friends like trapping insects, Rossi thought. Gathering the rare and the new and lining them up to peruse. Snatching them up and casting them aside with no thought for how much blood and sweat had gone into their formation. Without even the life experience to enable the capacity for such imaginings. One

glance at that vapid smile proved he'd grown up with no struggles, no setbacks, no sorrows. He'd grasped nothing by his own hand, let nothing slip through the fingers of those hands, simply feasted upon what had been granted him unconditionally. To Rossi's mind, someone like that had no place at Kimberly. Least of all near Oliver Horn and Nanao Hibiya.

"If something truly matters, you find the answer your damn self! As I did! As Oliver and Nanao did! You skipped the steps we all take and 'ave the nerve to act like you are their friend!"

A burst of rage culminating in a heel to Yuri's solar plexus. A ripple through his diaphragm took his breath away and sent his body rag-dolling. Unable to catch himself, he landed hard on his back, sliding toward the edge of the ring face up. Rossi lowered his leg, snorting.

"A clean 'it, that one. Take a good nap. This beating is no fun for anyone. I refuse to admit you even have the right to be 'ere on this stage."

With that, he turned his back, not even deigning to finish off his opponent. Like he'd just been sweeping the dirt off before the opening act, the real battle reserved exclusively for the other two fighters. Rossi headed straight for them.

"...That makes sense!"

The tone was oddly earnest. Rossi paused. That was not the infantile cheer he so despised. It was the voice of someone legitimately gazing inward. A voice from the *soul*.

"I'm drawn to mysteries. Strange things, things I don't know, things that are hidden—I just can't help myself. Most of the time, I see a thing, I hear the answer right away. And the few exceptions get me so excited! I always wondered *why*."

Forcing his wobbling limbs into action, Yuri got to his feet, his breathing shallow, his body heavy. A novel experience—so this was what happened when you got hit in the chest. This was not something he'd *heard*. It was something his body had experienced for itself, and that fact proved an immense comfort. The answers that came when he asked had never given him such joy.

"But it's actually really simple. I go after mysteries because otherwise I hear the answers. I'm told before I can look myself, which means I never get to truly *know*. The answers I hear are merely gifts and not real knowledge. I'm not after the mysteries so much as the process that gets me there."

He had confused the means and the end. All that racing about in pursuit of mystery, but all along he had sought not the answers but the thirst for them. To grasp them himself, not wait for them to come to him. What he gained that way was not cobbled together but an

answer all his own.

“Rossi, you’re absolutely right. I never knew the meaning of knowing! It can never be divorced from the search. If you wanna know something, you’ve gotta walk there on your own two feet, part that brush with your own hands, dig down into the dirt until you get there. And what I find that way is at last my own. Only then does the path I’ve tread become *me*.”

He’d gotten to the crux of the theory and rose to his feet on wobbly knees. Rossi’s eyes narrowed in a sidelong glare. Oliver saw a clear change—nay, a transformation—in his teammate and, trading spells with Andrews, whispered his name.

“...Yuri...”

Yuri Leik’s head lolled back, his whole world turned upside down. That one *voice* seemed farther away. The answers it gave were indistinct, hard to make out. Yet, in return, he’d gained *reality*. The certainty that he was alive and standing right here. The conviction to walk this path on his own two feet and take pride in it.

“I get it now, Oliver!” he said. “I’ve always been looking for *myself*.”

The light dawning on his purpose, Yuri drew his athame. The tip was pointed at Rossi, who slowly wheeled toward him.

“...Well, look at this. You *can* show us something, eh?”

Rossi’s lip curled in amusement. This changed everything.

Suddenly, he found himself facing another human. One with his own goals and purpose, one aware of the turmoil that would bring, and one ready to pay the price to get there. Self-centered, shortsighted, and never satisfied—just like Rossi himself.

In which case, there was nothing to despise. Annoying, yes, but not despicable.

The new Yuri was worth fighting.

“All right, then. I shall let you ’ave another shot.”

Switching tacks, Rossi fired a blockade spell toward the ground to the left of Yuri—at the southern edge of the ring. Then he lunged forward into a charge. The terrain alteration limited Yuri’s options, and Rossi’s improvised attacks kept him unpredictable. The advantage was all his. There was little Yuri could do.

But he’d steeled himself for that. Of the few options available—he chose the one *least* like himself. He inhaled to maximum lung capacity—and roared.

“VAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“___?!”

The volume of it echoed in Rossi’s entrails, and he froze up. An Old Rizett trick—the Dragon’s Roar. By enhancing his lungs and vocal cords, his shout was far louder than anything humans could produce.

One of the Rizett founder's favorite tricks, but in Yuri's case, he'd acquired it independently by imitating monsters in the labyrinth.

The move slammed his opponent's senses, making them instinctively stiffen up—but these days, it was considered useless. It simply didn't work against an experienced foe with the right knowledge and mindset—two things Rossi had discarded to achieve Freed Mind. Worse, he'd never once seen Yuri raise his voice at all. For him to bust that move out here was just shocking enough—a massive impression fluctuation—for it to momentarily overwhelm Rossi's capacity for ad-libbing.

“Ahhh!”

And while he stood rooted to the spot, Yuri came in swinging. A reckless charge with all the ferocity of a wounded animal, it forced Rossi to acknowledge he was facing an entirely different foe. Far beyond simply going on the offensive, he had fundamentally altered his very approach to combat. Yuri now had the bloody determination of a warrior hell-bent on winning at all costs.

“...Ha! Since when were you this fun, eh? This is the kind of fight I like!”

“I don't need to be *told*. I'll get to know you firsthand, Rossi!”

With that, Yuri stepped closer still, and Rossi's blade moved at full power. Their clash was now every bit as intense as the other pairings—their very souls in commune, a new act just begun.

“Leik's whole style shifted,” Godfrey mused, arms folded. “A much more aggressive approach.”

“Best way to counter a Freed Mind.” Lesedi nodded. “If your foe doesn't play by the rules, it's always a solid approach to not give them the leeway to *do* anything. And then force them onto your own home turf. As long as Leik's going hard, he's the one setting the terms. The challenge he poses limits the viable options, diminishing his foe's capacity for creative combat.”

“Right, his original reactive stance was the worst tactic. His preternatural prediction made that work against previous foes, but ordinarily, no one can withstand an unfettered assault without employing gambits to ensure a degree of control. Arguably, this has only now become a sword arts duel. Their real fight has just begun.”

Godfrey broke off there, focusing on the fight itself. Watching the change in the student she'd helped coach, Lesedi smiled.

“Yeah, Leik's always been *observing*, not *fighting*. He enjoyed the process but was never invested in the outcome. But now—that's no longer true.”

“Fwew!”

His feint intentionally mistimed, Rossi let the momentum of his swing turn his back to his foe, planting both hands on the ground behind him. From there, his feet went up, kicking backward at his opponent’s head. Yuri bent his knees to duck below that and put one hand on the floor to return a sweeping kick of his own.

“I know that move! She taught it to me, too!”

A heel dug into Rossi’s side, and he lost his balance, reeling back. Yuri righted himself and bounded into a flying roundhouse kick, pressing the advantage. In no position to defend against that, Rossi’s only option was further retreat. They’d started with Yuri’s back against the edge of the ring, but now he was so close to the center that he could feel the clash of Nanao’s and Albright’s blades buffeting his back.

“You ’ave the nerve to show real style! Why not start with this in the first place?”

“Sorry, I only just worked it out!” Yuri beamed. “I *do* have a few tricks I’ve made my own!”

Yuri and Rossi had both learned these extracontinental martial arts tricks from the same source: Lesedi Ingwe. For a while they traded kicks, but as they neared the center of the ring, Oliver and Andrews started blasting spells at their flanks. In response, both boys leaped in opposite directions, and spotting a shift in the match’s flow, Nanao and Albright broke off their rain of blows and regrouped with their teams.

“You had me worried there,” Oliver said, standing just behind his teammates. “Should we work together?”

“Can do! Bring it!”

“Then allow me to lead!”

Nanao was all too eager to be first in. Albright took a step back, and Team Andrews put Rossi up against her.

The Azian girl took a diagonal swing from on high. It fell like a thunderbolt, but Rossi was on his toe, the floor’s friction eliminated—and the force sent him into a spin. He’d blocked with his gauntlet, not his blade, so this Tour sent him into a backhand blow. Fusing the polish of Koutz with the roughness of a street fight, a move he’d practiced in secret just for this fight.

“Foo!”

But Nanao saw it coming and bent slightly forward, ducking under it. Rossi was in no position to withstand her return slash, and he reeled back off-balance. His team fired a quick spell to ensure nothing came of it.

“What, your eyes can see Koutz now? Who do I ’ave to blame?”

“It was never your sole domain,” Albright snapped. “Shut up and

show them what that blasphemous blade of yours can do.”

Rossi's blend of Koutz and his own style was pretty high-level stuff, but not much good against opponents who'd just staved off Team Valois's pure Koutz. A move designed for a surprise one-shot had turned into a damp squib.

“You may rest easy, big man. I always 'ave more where that came from!”

This outcome was frustrating—yet simultaneously exactly what he wanted. He'd been anticipating this fight for ages, and his foes exceeding his expectations was something to be thankful for. Letting that joy lend wind to his sails, his edge undiminished, they threw themselves back into the blender.

“...The match is balanced once more,” Garland said. “This new side of Mr. Leik is unexpected. Mr. Linton, did you see that coming?”

While the movements on the field were certainly dynamic, the scales were yet again rock steady.

“I didn't see a damn thing comin’,” Tim said with a shrug. “They're *young*. You get in a fight this intense, you're gonna push a button or two. Leik's switch was just a tad more dramatic than most.”

This fact was plain as day to him, and the other booth guest was nodding, looking totally convinced. Gino had been evaluating the fighters like their skills were set in stone—at least partially because the two teams were impressively stable. But Tim was right: Experience changes us all. That fact should have been on everyone's mind.

“Growth in the heat of conflict. True, that was a factor I did not see, having spent no time with them. Tim, when did you turn into a perceptive mentor?”

“Shut it, swilltender. I've been the cute big bro figure the kids go crazy for from day one.”

Tim stuck out his tongue *and* held up a middle finger. A bit late to act the Toxic Gasser, and Gino had to stifle a laugh. He knew letting it out would just make Tim retreat to his old habits. That would be a waste; this new side of Tim was far too entertaining.

“.....”

But while the rest of the commentary booth was enthralled, Demitrio was watching the proceedings in a very different frame of mind. His eyes were now on one thing alone—the change sweeping over his own splinter.

“Seiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Impetus!”

“Prohibere!”

The stalemate lingered on. To the north of the ring, Nanao and Albright were giving each other no quarter. To the west, Oliver and Andrews were furiously outguessing each other, timing their support spells. To the east, Rossi eyed those battles even as he fended off Yuri's attacks.

“This match is too close,” he muttered. “I knew I would 'ave to punch a 'ole in it.”

A smirk crossed his lips. He and Yuri were both covered in wounds, and the long mutual pummeling had left them running out of stamina and focus. If they kept fighting like this, the outcome was anyone's guess; either one could prevail or fall, the results as unknowable as the weather.

And that was unacceptable. Rossi held fast to that point; if he threw the outcome to a roll of the dice, that was an admission he'd failed to play his part. This was a team battle, not a solo one; his role stemmed from what he could do and who he was. Stirring the pot of a stalemate was what Tullio Rossi *did*, and he had entered this league fully cognizant of that. Thus, he could not let things end with that purpose unfulfilled. Nothing as grand as duty or responsibility; this was simply a thing he *had* to do.

“...Huff!”

Mind made up, Rossi leaped back out of blade range. Yuri cast a spell right away, but then his eyes caught his foe's feet. Rubble on his toe, about to kick it his way—and while Yuri's mind was on that, Rossi slipped his gauntlet off behind his back and threw that, too.

“Fragor—ugh!”

A double feint into an adamant projectile. It hit Yuri's eye, knocking him back—and his burst spell flew off harmlessly skyward. And while he was recovering, Rossi turned his attention over his shoulder. As their swords clashed, Albright had reached out his off hand, trying to grab Nanao.

“Tonitrus!”

Pretending Yuri was his target, Rossi actually snapped his athame around, firing at Nanao. The bolt sped through the air, and Albright saw it coming first.

“! Frigus!”

Seizing the chance, Albright cast, too. A freezing spell from the fore and Rossi's bolt from behind, Nanao trapped between them. Undaunted by this predicament, she was already moving to handle it.

“Hfff!”

A step in, catching the spell on her katana—and a turn. Using a two-handed Flow Cut to send the cold to her rear, the strength of it

pushing Rossi's lightning back. Yet, this meant turning her eyes away from her *actual* foe, even if only for an instant. And Albright lunged into the gap.

"Gotcha, Hibiya!"

Certain he'd won, Albright went to a high stance. The spell deflected, Nanao snapped back his way, but even so, she couldn't block in time. Her blade went up but unsupported; it was pushed back, bearing down upon her own throat. The evidence of his eyes beyond denial, Albright knew how this ended—

"____?!"

But even as he grew convinced, *something* came tumbling before him. While their battle teetered on thin ice, it had traced a leisurely arc through the air above, slipping between them moments before the hit landed.

A burst spell. The one Yuri had sent flying yonder when the gauntlet struck him.

"Gah!"

Yanking the reins on his all-out lunge, Albright just barely avoided a direct hit. The spell burst before his very eyes, dyeing his vision red with flames. He'd dodged it. The right choice in the eyes of anyone present. Only a complete fool would dive into a burst spell of their own volition.

Which was why his own good sense proved his undoing.

"Seiiiiiii!"

Here came the fool. As he stepped back, Nanao plunged into the explosion. Every inch of her scorched, shards of shrapnel from the floor gouging her cheek, yet she paid that no heed, eyes only on the enemy at hand.

"Wha—?"

He could not have seen this coming. The fact that his blade was up at all was nothing short of miraculous. But that last resistance was cruelly forced aside, her swing slicing deep from his shoulder across his chest.

"You...stepped *in*? There...?"

"Retreat meant defeat. That was all I needed to know."

Nanao's answer came back like the ringing of a gong. The concept was almost stupidly simple—and Albright realized that *this* had decided their fates. The insistence upon survival carved into his very core as heir to a Gnostic Hunter dynasty.

Conceding his loss and the cause, Albright gave his weakening arm one last push. This left his body toppling over backward. Intending to lay him down softly, Nanao wrung out her remaining strength, propelling her wounded frame forward—

"Hng—"

—but the advancing foot sank to the ankle in the mire. She paused, and as Albright fell on his back, he aimed his athame with the minimum of effort—he, too, had a task to fulfill.

“...Frigus.”

One last spell, squeezed out from severed lungs. No real force to it. But Nanao had no means left to handle it. No time to chant, dodge, or deflect, all she could do was fruitlessly shield herself with her arms, allowing the spell to half freeze her. When he was sure of that, Albright let himself go limp.

“Gnostic Hunters don’t die in vain. The rest is yours, Andrews.”

Holding steadfast to his core despite his loss, thus Joseph Albright was the first to exit the battle. Nanao watched him go with unvarnished admiration, then let out a long breath—and pulled her foot from the mire. Scarcely any feeling left in either arm, but she could manage one last swing of her katana.

With her battle done, Nanao wheeled around—in time to see the other fight end. Rossi and Yuri, nigh embracing, each stabbing the other.

“...You knew I would do that, eh? Aim for Nanao?” Rossi whispered, athame buried in his opponent’s chest.

Yuri’s whisper came back in his ear. “I had a hunch, yeah. I’ve learned a thing or two about you.”

That was how he’d called it. Nanao and Albright’s duel had been largely rooted to the spot. Team Horn had prearranged signals hidden in the enunciation of spell chants. Each of those things had helped make Yuri’s surprise attack possible. But the single biggest factor was his own observation skills. How did Rossi think? What mattered most to him? How would he act as the battle wound down? His mind had been gnawing away at each of those questions, and when he really needed it—his mind went into overdrive. Not with the curiosity of a kid finding a new bug but with a deep interest and understanding of the man before him.

Yet, the resolution to his own fight lay elsewhere. Rossi’s athame was embedded in Yuri’s chest. That had unarguably settled things, yet Yuri’s athame was deep in Rossi’s left leg. He’d released it at the moment of the stab and wrapped his arms around his foe’s waist. Using spatial magic to liquify the floor beneath them and leaving them both sunk knee-deep within.

“Knowing more...is really fun.”

He chewed those words over...and then his mind cut out. His knees crumpled into the mire, but his hands clasped behind Rossi’s back refused to let go. Before his consciousness faded, he’d fastened the skin of his hands together.

Stuck in the hold of a defeated foe, Rossi tried to pry himself free

—and soon realized that was a futile effort.

“My leg—it will not move...”

The wounded limb was dead, inert. The remaining leg alone was not enough to escape this sludge, not with Yuri acting as a deadweight around him. A few feeble shakes hardly enough to dislodge the arms embracing him. They were his dedication—Yuri Leik’s stubborn insistence on bringing victory to his side.

With time, there were plenty of options available. But time was what Rossi did not have. Nanao had sent a fire spell his way, bearing down on his back with no escape available.

“Argh... You really are an aggravation.”

A grumble, delivered with a sigh. Effectively a compliment to his sleeping foe—and then Rossi’s body was swallowed in the blistering heat.

With two fights finalized, Nanao dragged her heavy body toward the last. Oliver saw this and came to her, lining up beside her. The katana slipped from her hands.

“Oliver, I’m afraid...this is as much as I can muster.”

Her gaze dropped, her tone tinged with regret. The spell that finished Rossi had been her last; with it, her ice-encrusted arms had ceased to function. She couldn’t move anything from the elbows down, let alone grip a hilt. And the effects of the blast had her on the verge of collapse regardless.

Oliver had been acutely aware of her condition, so he merely nodded, eyes never leaving his foe.

“Well done. Leave the rest to me.”

Not a waver in his voice. Nanao grinned and let her knees buckle. The audience was now hesitant to make a sound, watching with bated breath. Silence you could cut with a knife hung over the ring. Only two had the right to break it.

“This is it, Mr. Andrews. Let’s settle things.”

“Yeah.”

Andrews nodded, and each adjusted their position. As if the clock had been turned back, it was just the two of them again—time to bring this match to a conclusion.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh...!” Glenda gasped, realizing she’d been holding her breath. “Wild gambit after wild gambit, and each side loses two fighters! I’m ashamed to admit I forgot to do my job! How splendid the sights these six shared with us!”

“Mr. Rossi’s surprise attack tipped the scales, but Mr. Leik had

already laid the groundwork. While dodging the rubble, he acted like his spell was knocked off target, while actually arcing it over right where he wanted it. Since Ms. Hibiya and Mr. Albright were largely trading blows in a single location, he could land it with pinpoint accuracy, certain where they'd be."

Garland sounded suitably impressed. The flow that had claimed four fighters had been riveting, and each part of it spoke to their individual stances and dedications.

"Ms. Hibiya's bold step through the explosion and Mr. Albright's final spell were both magnificent. Mr. Leik's choice to aim for Mr. Rossi's leg and lock him down was likely predicated on that outcome. One-legged in a mire, Mr. Rossi could not escape in time to avoid the final spell."

"I couldn't believe my eyes! Mr. Leik must have realized he was unlikely to survive and sought a way to avoid going down alone... right?"

"I'd say so." Garland nodded. "The thrown gauntlet claimed his eye. A sacrifice to disguise the arced spell, but it meant he was no longer in any position to trade blows with Mr. Rossi. Mutual elimination was likely his best option."

To the bitter end, both fighters had been focused on ensuring victory for their side. And the result of that conflict had been a double elimination. For all Rossi's harsh words during the fight, when things were said and done, Yuri's read on him had been entirely accurate. And the human factor was what really stood out to the instructor's eye.

"All those eliminated did their jobs and set the stage for their team leaders. It's the final one-on-one. Master Garland, does either have an advantage?"

"Both still have plenty of energy left, so it's hard to say. Rather than speculate idly, let's just watch and find out."

And with that, Garland fell silent. No matter what he said here, the outcome would soon come to light. And the evidence of their eyes would be worth a thousand words from him.

"...Hff..."

"...Hahhh..."

The two fighters had caught their breath. They needed no words to agree to this; both athames leaped to the fore.

"Impetus!"

"Prohibere!"

A dramatic departure from his previous visualizations, Andrews's spell was a point, not a plane. A spear of compressed wind hurled at

Oliver, who spotted it and responded with a pinpoint spell of the oppositional, deflecting the spear so it passed by his flank. Yet, his opponent's intent was only ever to distract Oliver before their blades engaged. Andrews followed his spell in, and Oliver met his athame in his default mid-stance.

"Shiiii!"

As he entered one-step, one-spell range, Andrews *thrusted*. Oliver's blade clashed against it, but the length of the blade felt off—and he spied the trick at hand. Shrivel Shiv, where the winds shrouding your blade refracted the light, making the blade look shorter than it was.

"Hahhh!"

But that was merely a setup; on Andrews's next thrust, the athame's hilt slid forward across his palm. The Rizett school's Glib Foil—shifting your grip on the blade mid-attack, a discrepancy of several inches that could easily catch an opponent off guard. Combined with Shrivel Shiv, the effect was all the more bewildering.

"Hfff!"

But Oliver was well versed in both techniques and hardly foolish enough to judge a blade's length by sight alone. He watched not the tip but the hand holding the hilt, using his spatial senses to ascertain the length of the blade itself and deflect it. His rock-solid handling was all it took for Andrews to know he wasn't fooling anyone, and he abandoned the deceptive camouflage, instead using the wind to *lengthen* the blade's reach—Extend Edge.

"Ahhh!"

Yet, still, Andrews knew perfectly well his opponent would never let these little tricks get to him. Minimizing the risk to himself, laying down technical tricks until his opponent mishandled something—a shallow strategy like that would *never* lead to victory here.

From his heart, he admired his opponent's remarkable skill. Humans are naturally inclined to seek victory. Those with any measure of talent and the minimal fundamentals learn a few powerful attacks and quickly begin to defeat their peers. Winning three out of five is not too difficult. Eight out of ten is an extension of that and achievable enough. But a hundred victories in an equal number of matches—well, you aren't getting there sticking to a single approach. That realm is achievable only through far tougher, more thorough training and layer upon layer of ingenuity.

But that was the nature of Oliver Horn's sword. One designed not to merely score frequent victories but to consistently prevail in the long run. Any gaps in body, skill, or mind that could lead to defeat had been carefully patched up. A long and arduous journey compared to your more standard "allow a degree of risk and win as much as you can" approach. Andrews himself had the natural gifts and the

privilege of good practice partners; when he'd first picked up the blade, he'd taken joy in his rapid improvement. But Oliver likely never had. Andrews didn't know how his opponent had honed himself, but at the very least, he was sure it took years of hard work and suffering before this boy had savored the fruits of triumph. Or—whatever had possessed him to endure that wall of time was likely beyond Andrews's wildest imaginings.

And yet—despite that history, Oliver wore a pleasant smile. He was earnest and kind. Not reproaching weakness, not harping on his peers' inadequacies. Just quietly meeting them at their level and encouraging them to grow. Which is why they did just that. Katie Aalto, Guy Greenwood, Pete Reston—all their talents had blossomed. Sprouts buffeted by the harsh winds of Kimberly, yet Oliver's warmth had been a trellis supporting their development.

It was all too much for Andrews. The very sight of Oliver made his heart ache. It made him yearn to know this boy better, to be involved. To sit with him and talk, learn what he felt and how he thought—what time could be better spent? That circle of friends calling themselves the Sword Roses—what joy it would be to join their company.

But he hadn't dared voice the smallest fragment of that desire. He'd already disgraced himself before them, and that past was not so easily overcome. He was here now to make amends. His sole purpose to earn the right to say that simplest of phrases.

Namely: *Can we be friends?*

“...Hfff!”

With that in mind, he went for it. A dozen furious strikes and he saw his moment, making a sweeping slice at his opponent's throat. Oliver had long since seen through his illusions. He leaned out of harm's way by the smallest of margins, intent on issuing a swift reprisal—

“____!”

—but before he recovered his posture, he drew to an abrupt halt.

His spatial senses were tingling. Andrews's swing had passed his neck, but a dagger of wind remained. A micro-tornado, spinning in place in the air. The Rizett school's Linger Blade. Andrews had always been a preeminent wind wrangler, although this technique was achievable only by wringing the utmost out of the visualization possible within your personal zone.

With a trap pointed at his throat, Oliver was left leaning awkwardly backward, unable to right himself. Not a stance he could attack or defend from—he was exposed to a degree Andrews could likely never hope to replicate, and he risked everything he had, going for a finish.

“Rahhhhhhh!”

The Rizett Hero’s Charge. Leaning so far forward that he ducked right under the Linger Blade, attacking—and with Oliver off-balance, he could not put his back behind any defenses. Yet, the charge’s momentum was too great to block with arms and blade alone. The first step would have to be backing a step away from the Linger Blade, but that was *why* Andrews had chosen a Hero’s Charge. If Oliver did back off, he needed merely take an extra step...and sink his blade into his opponent’s chest. This fact would not change even if Oliver straight up *fell* backward—Andrews need merely adjust the trajectory of his thrust to the position of his heart.

“*Hah—!*”

Andrews was certain he was one step away from victory—but Oliver did *not* back away.

Instead, he dropped his hips.

“____?!”

His blade fell, striking the incoming thrust from on high. It knocked Andrews’s blade off course so hard, the tip sank into the floor below. Even as Andrews gaped at that—his instincts went off like he’d been struck by lightning. He *knew* what Oliver had done.

Off-balance, Oliver had been unable to properly block. A step back wouldn’t leave him enough time to do so, either. Instead, he had dropped his hips, adding gravity’s weight to his blade while using spatial magic to cancel the friction on his soles and speed up his sudden sit.

Lanoff had no such move. That school’s entire repertoire relied on having both feet firmly planted on the ground. Oliver had simply abandoned those constraints on the spur of the moment. Certain that in this singular moment, this deviance was the only means of conquering his opponent’s challenge.

With his blade downed, Andrews was forced to his knees. Oliver had landed first, their eyes on the same level—and for an instant, their gazes met. Andrews tried to pull back on his right, but a hand closed around his wrist, rendering him unable to move. Oliver’s athame came right toward his heart.

“____!”

No move he made could evade *that*—so Andrews caught it with his left palm.

“Gahhhhhhhh...!”

With the blade impaled there, he held it fast. The guard against his palm, he pushed it back with all his might, but this was his off hand and Oliver’s dominant one. His posture left him with less leverage, and he was forced steadily back. There was no move that could twist this to his advantage. He knew that beyond all shadow of a doubt.

But it never occurred to him to give up. No matter how dire the odds, he could not abandon this hope. Desperation in his eyes, Andrews fueled his struggle against fate with all the desires and purpose he had within. Oliver was close enough to see all that firsthand.

“...I know. I get you, Andrews,” he murmured.

His opponent’s feelings resonated within him, painfully so. Not one drop of it went astray. And thus:

Enough. There’s nothing more you need say.

To communicate that, Oliver spoke again. Voicing the feelings that had long been warming within him. The words he had long, long wished to speak.

“You’ve grown so strong.”

When that gentle voice hit his ears, Andrews’s hand went limp, accepting the outcome at last as Oliver’s athame slid straight into him.

“Called! Match complete,” Garland intoned, his voice echoing across the silent arena. “All members of Team Andrews eliminated. Team Horn has one survivor. Thus, the victory goes to Team Horn. And as of this moment, they are your new junior-league champions!”

He made this into a genuine pronouncement. And at last, the crowd exploded. A bucking wave of deafening noise billowing against every eardrum. Turning up the volume on her amplification spell to match it, Glenda wiped the tears from her eyes and went into her wrap-up spiel.

“It’s aaaaaaall over! Give it up big time for these fighters! A breathtaking display to the bitter end! I couldn’t be more proud that I got to announce this fight and get to be at Kimberly with mages like these! Congratulations, Team Horn! You’re the best around!”

As the crowd roared, the outcome was finally sinking in with the winning team’s friends.

“...Whoaaaa...!” Guy rose to his feet, arms shaking.

“They won! They really won!” Katie kept saying, her voice worn out from cheering.

“Yes...yes, they did...” Chela nodded, a veritable waterfall streaming from her eyes.

Pete, sitting next to them, suddenly clutched his throat with both hands.

“...Hahhh...hahhh...”

“Yo, you okay there, Pete? You’re hyperventilating!”

Guy and Katie scrambled to pat his back. Chela—tears still falling

—moved in front of him, cupping his cheeks.

“I can’t blame you. It was the kind of match where you don’t dare blink. Pete, you’re okay now. Relax...”

“How are you even making that many tears?! You’re gonna dry out!” Guy yelled.

“If I do, I have no regrets. It was just...that good a match. I shall never forget it. The sight of those six brave souls, fighting with all their might...!”

“They won!” Rita cried, far too wound up. “See, Teresa? See?”

“Of course they did. Stop shaking me.”

“I dunno how you stay so chill, Teresa... My palms are all sweaty!” Peter said. His fists had been clenched the entire duration.

Beside him, Dean was still breathing heavily, just as worked up. Then it occurred to him to toss a question over Teresa’s head to the girl at his side.

“Quite a fight, huh? I bet even you’ve got nothing to nitpick.”

“...Hmph. Yes, it was certainly above average for the junior league.”

Felicia had her legs folded gracefully, but despite her words, Dean could see the hairs on the nape of her neck standing on end.

“...You’re so worked up, you’ve got goose bumps. You really should just admit it.”

“No, it’s quite cold in here. They did a poor job with temperature control. I shall have to file a complaint.”

“...Whatever helps you sleep at night, I guess.”

Giving up the fight, Dean turned back to the ring. But he kept one eye on Felicia, who continued to vibrate in her seat.

He smirked. *She’s a lot easier to read than I thought.* Quite an upgrade from his first impression.

Cheers for their tremendous battle raining down without end, Oliver stood in the ring, quietly staring at his feet. There lay his final opponent, exhausted and on his back.

“...If you’d stuck to spells, this might’ve ended differently. Did you not consider that?”

Andrews slowly turned his gaze toward Oliver. He had just been stabbed, and the wound ran deep. Coupled with the exhaustion of the fight, he could barely feel his limbs—but the dulling spell ensured the wound was not fatal. Ordinarily, one would send a burst of magic through one’s athame to finish off an impaled foe, but Oliver chose not to, having deemed it unnecessary.

Thus, even now, Andrews had enough left in him to speak. It took him a moment, but he began to answer. "I showed no sword arts in earlier matches. I was saving them for you. I figured if I didn't show that hand here, it would all go to waste."

"...Ah," Oliver said, smiling. It made total sense.

Andrews gazed up at him for a moment, then asked a question of his own.

"That move against the Hero's Charge—was that drop a spur-of-the-moment thing?"

"Yeah, my body mostly moved on its own there. I couldn't do anything in an ordinary stance, so my approach was unorthodox. It was only timed to hit your blade because you came in at maximum speed. If you'd put a feint in there, I'd have been done for."

This explanation served only to impress Andrews all the more. Oliver had spent a long time polishing his skills as a Lanoff traditionalist but hadn't hesitated to discard that theory the moment the situation demanded it. Andrews briefly reflected on his choice not to feint but concluded it had been his only outcome. If that feint had given Oliver time to retreat, the moment would have been lost. Which meant his choice of finishers had sealed his loss.

"Come to think of it...Rossi did something similar against Team Cornwallis. Didn't think I'd see the likes from you."

"Did he? Maybe all that sparring we've done has rubbed off on me."

Nonplussed by that, Oliver scratched his cheek. They'd certainly spent enough time dueling to have influenced each other somehow. And he had to admit he *did* rather admire Rossi's free spirit. If their time together had clinched a major victory here, then he owed Rossi one. He could just picture the Ytallian's look of horror if he tried to thank him.

For a while, neither spoke again, just letting the silence sit. In that comfortable hush, Oliver's mind explored what he'd sensed from Andrews during the fight. It was all too easy to imagine the time he'd spent preparing himself for this match. And the pride he sought beyond it.

It was possible they'd never have a chance to speak this openly again. That thought made Oliver's lips move, almost of their own accord.

"So, uh...Mr. Andrews."

"?"

"That was a real good match. I'm not particularly prone to enjoy my fights, but...my time with you was genuinely fulfilling. It's almost a shame it had to end."

He was definitely feeling his way to something here. Couldn't let

the nerves get in his way—he'd won, so it was his turn to reach out.

"Um...I guess what I'm trying to say is..."

The choice of words eluded him. He wasn't usually this inarticulate, but this time he simply couldn't find an apt turn of phrase. Increasingly unsure he could get his intent across at all, he persevered.

"I'd like it if we could spar more often, not just on these...special occasions. Work through whatever we messed up together, explore each other's strength and weaknesses from every angle... No, this is all wrong. I didn't mean to get so stiff."

The more logic he applied, the further he strayed from his goal. Realizing that, he threw caution to the wind and sat back down. Knees together, back upright, hands on his lap. A posture Nanao had taught him, from back home in Yamatsu—the *seiza*.

"I'd like to get to know you better. That's my real point here," Oliver said. "So...will you be my friend, Mr. Andrews?"

All clutter cast aside. And the words took Andrews's breath away. He felt a heat rising behind his nostrils and something welling up in his eyes. To avoid Oliver seeing that, he was forced to turn his head away.

".....Richard," Andrews said at length. He spoke quickly, to disguise the tremor in his voice. "That's what my closest friends call me. Chela went with Rick, but that's only ever been her. And it digs up childhood memories, so I'd rather she not."

Oliver nodded and gave his knees some mercy. He knew he'd gotten the message across. No more need for formality. He turned to sit alongside Andrews, looking up at the ceiling, legs outstretched.

"Got it, Richard. I sure am beat."

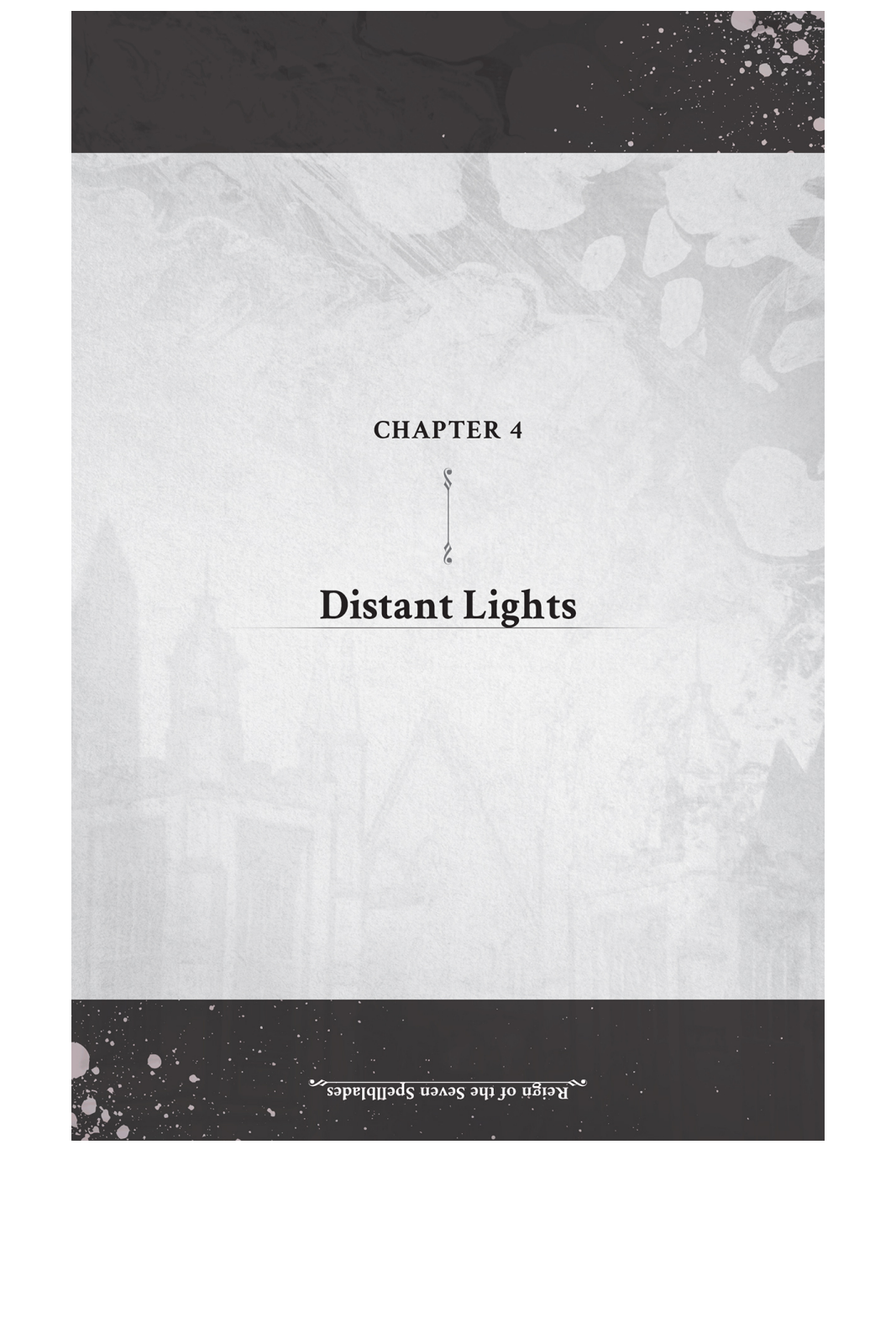
"Yeah, same. Can't lift a finger."

Each spoke from the heart. Andrews at last got his wits about him and turned back toward Oliver. His right arm alone still moved a little, so he made a fist and held it out.

"Next one's mine, Oliver."

The first time he'd ever addressed him like that, but it settled naturally onto his tongue. Oliver grinned and bumped his fist.





CHAPTER 4



Distant Lights

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He loved how clear the skies were in winter, especially on chilly evenings.

Shouldering a hefty rucksack and his beloved telescope, he climbed the hill. Made from the finest materials, it was far heavier than a fully grown man but felt like cotton candy. He was drawn to the starry sky, so his feet were all the lighter for it.

There was a little deck at the top of the hill. The villagers had built it for him three years after he'd been posted here. They'd refused to tell him what it was until they'd finished it, and when the building was done, they'd brought him up there. He'd been unable to speak at all, the joy so great it left him shaking.

Perhaps the city mages would have less than kind words for it. An ordinary human's carpentry was limited in scale and function. Using golems would give you a far grander structure in much less time.

...True, but that wasn't the point. The reason he'd been that happy? This proved the villagers got exactly what he loved the most.

As his feet neared the crest of the hill, he heard whispers up ahead. Young children's voices. He had an idea of who. He picked up his pace and found three children in bulky winter clothes.

"Ah! Teach is here!"

"See? I told you he'd come today!"

"Shut it, Luca! I knew it all along!"

He'd expected this trio, but not the others. More children were spilling out from the back of the deck. Every one of them bundled up warm, their cheeks rosy—clearly, they'd all been waiting for him to arrive.

"What?" he yelped. "Why are you all here? Do you know how freezing it is? You'll catch a cold!"

"No we won't!"

"And if we do, you'll heal us!"

"I've got mittens on! See? See?"

Almost every member of his class at the village school was here. It was especially cold—and the sky especially clear—and they must have known he'd been looking forward to his visit here all day. He shook his head and put the telescope down, unshouldering his rucksack.

"I don't know what to do with you kids... I brought extras just in case, but if there's not enough, you're going to have to send the little ones off home first. Put these in your pockets. They're hot, so be careful when you touch!"

"So warm!"

"Ohhh! Nothing can stop us now!"

"I could stay here all night!"

He'd handed each child a heat orb encased in a fireproof cotton pouch. A magic tool that required no mana to use, designed for ordinaries. He made a lot of these everyday-use items for the village. Village mages were famous for their quick handiwork, but that was inevitable; if you weren't fast, you'd never keep up with demand.

When everyone had an orb in their pocket, he filled their cups with sweet milk tea from a thermal pot. When he was sure all the children were taken care of, he finally turned back to the telescope, his gaze drifting to the sky above. Not a cloud to be seen, a sea of stars awaiting him.

"...Looking good. Let's start our observations. Everyone remember the deal?"

"No shaking!"

"No yelling!"

"Never touch the lens!"

They sounded indignant. They always *said* the right things, but he could count on one hand the number of times the rules had gone unbroken. But that didn't bother him. If he was really in the mood to focus, he could just say so, and they'd leave him to his own devices. And having the children with him kept his mind from flying away from him. How many times had his parents scolded him for it? *When you're gazing, you aren't here at all. You're up there, among the stars.*

He peered through the lens, adjusting the angle and magnification, setting the focus on today's subject. Today he was looking at a distant star, one he rarely got a chance to see at all. A glimpse of a *tír*, all marbled purple and black.

"Oh gosh...", he said, a hint of longing to his sigh. "Vanato, the Chthonic Retreat. So big and clear! In the city, it was never more than a faint light. You need clear air and high ground to make it out!"

As he gazed avidly, he sensed a little body by his side. The youngest girl in his class, Maya.

"It's called that 'cause it's very lonely, right?"

"You remember that? Yes, that *tír* is all on its own. It draws near

our world far less often than the others, and if there are migrations, they soon die out, never taking hold. They think it's the same with the other tír. The creatures from Vanato lack the strength to adapt to other environments."

"Like how I get lonely if I'm outside too long?"

"...Yeah, maybe. But I think you can get lonely if you spend too long home alone, too. That's why it always sends a small number of migrations. It knows they'll be left alone and die out, but it hopes they'll meet someone at the end of their journey."

"...If you go there, would it be happy?" another child asked.

The boy next to Maya was the most active, boisterous kid in class. It was highly unusual for him to join in this quietly. And that made him smile.

"Wouldn't that be nice? But it's easier said than done. There aren't many ways to go there or times when you can. And I don't want to get lonely and die over there, so I would have to spend a long time getting ready. But the main thing—the way the magic world thinks these days, you don't go to a tír. So many scary things come from them that the mages are busy wiping them out, scared of what they'll do. Even if I said I wanted to try, no one would listen."

"Don't give up!"

"Are they all scary? They can't be!"

"Some of them are nice! I know it!"

"Yeah, they've gotta be!"

Whenever he sounded defeated, the children jumped in to cheer him up. That brought a tear to his eye. He'd spent ages in the city, frustrated and lost, with no one around to offer encouragement. His reputation as a weird tír lover had dogged his footsteps, and he'd accepted the offer of a job as a village mage to flee that ostracization. Not a past to be proud of, but looking at these kids, he knew he'd made the right choice.

"That's what I believe," he said. "That's why I'm always looking for signs they aren't all bad. But this telescope just isn't powerful enough to see much of anything."

He took his eyes away from the telescope lens, turning back to the kids and smiling. Maya tugged at his sleeve.

"When I grow up, I'll help you look."

"Thank you, Maya. I'll give you the best telescope I can build."

A little promise for a bold offer. She would likely forget all about it, and that was fine. He wanted her to live her own life and be what she wanted to be: free of the harsh and cruel reality of a mage's life. But if she grew up to be someone who loved seeing the stars, then being her village teacher had been worth it.

"The stars are so pretty, Mr. Demitrio."

“Yes, they are. They’re very beautiful indeed.”

A pleasant hour, trading views with the little girl. Nursing his long-held dream of one day traveling among the stars, hoping from the bottom of his heart that these happy days would last forever.

The day after the junior-league finale, contestants gathered on the labyrinth’s second layer, the bustling forest, to join in the bonus exhibition round. The event’s instigator, Theodore, looked at the faces assembled.

“All participating teams are here? Good, then let me run down the concept. You’ll be competing to eliminate specific species from the second layer, earning points for your team by quantity dispatched.”

He pointed his white wand at the blackboards behind him. They contained a list of a dozen or so flora and fauna, complete with illustrations. These were the first specifics they’d received on the targets of their hunt, and as their eyes ran down the list, every brow furrowed. They had not expected the list to be more than half *plants*.

“Here you’ll find your targets. The descriptions include the environments you’ll find them in and how to eliminate them. Your time limit is two hours on the dot. Participating teams will be split between several areas and will hunt within those boundaries. To compensate for the advantage a year brings, our second-year teams will begin with fifty points.

“Your actions in each area will be supervised by an upperclassman. The list of who’s assigned to whom is over here. Supervisors, you’ll get no reward, but consider this a chance to demonstrate your leadership skills. I leave the specifics in your hands, but remember to balance overall effectiveness against the individual team’s performances. Neglecting the latter in particular will result in sour grapes.”

To Theodore’s side were a group of presidential candidates—Miligan, Whalley, and Tim among them—all here to prove they were good leaders. Sparks were already flying between Miligan and Whalley.

“Next up, prohibited acts. Naturally, no interference with other teams, but there’s also no trading or gifting targets between teams—not even guidance or deference. You’ve all got crafty minds and are looking for loopholes, I’m sure. I won’t dissuade you from doing so, but do remember that I’m watching from above with my eyes peeled. And if I witness any violations, I will be eliminating teams outright.” Then Theodore added, “That’s all for the rules. Any questions?”

He glanced around, looking pleased with himself. The rules themselves were standard, but the bulk of the targets being immobile vegetation was clearly not right for a *combat* league. Questioning that

—yet also picking up on the motives that lay behind it—the students began to speak.

“I...guess it’s a question?”

“This is just...cleaning up the mess from the prelim, then?”

“Far from it! I would never pretend to dangle a carrot over the losing teams and force them to help restore the intended ecosystems! But I *do* highly recommend focusing on this rock-eating cactus brought up from the fifth layer. They tend to put down very deep roots, you see, and grow right back if you aren’t terribly careful with the removal. Total coincidence that they give so many points, of course, but focusing exclusively on them is a viable strategy!”

He could not be more blatantly manipulative if he tried. Everyone involved just rolled their eyes. The upper forms’ prelim had been a trail run that completely upended the second layer’s ecosystem—and this was just an excuse to make them help fix it. Waiting for the labyrinth’s homeostasis to kick in would take too long.

“...Guess we’re here to mow the lawn. Shouldn’t’ve gotten myself worked up.”

“I’m actually...relieved? If the goal is to restore the ecosystem, it’s a lot easier to live with competitive hunting.”

“But still just wiping their butts for them.”

Team Aalto wasn’t mincing words. “*Mow the lawn*” wasn’t far from the truth. Vanessa had already amused herself by slaughtering all the larger, dangerous beasts; now just a bunch of small fries were left. Any hopes of getting one’s clammy hands on a real monster were consequently dashed.

“Welp, guess we can’t complain. Six mil to first place, three to second, and one to third. Ludicrous riches for a two-hour chore. Gotta get that moolah.”

“Our wallets are *very* empty.”

“We spent so much on intel before the league began... Gotta try and make it back somehow.”

Splinter specialist Rosé Mistral and his team spoke with a tinge of desperation. Teams that had been in the league to win were deeply emotionally invested, and failing to rank at all had left them in dire financial straits. If there was a chance to rectify that, then they were ready and willing.

“Ohhh, flora are worth a lot! That’s what I’m good at!”

“I wish you the best.”

“Hey, wait! You’re not going anywhere! Stay and help!”

On Team Carste, Rita was pretty motivated, but Teresa herself was only here because Dean had his hand on her collar. Felicia’s Team—the other group of second-years—wasn’t far off.

“I will not touch *dirt*. You know what that means, lackeys?”

“The task is ours!”

“We won’t let you lift a finger, Lady Felicia!”

Her teammates saluted, backs bolt upright, and their leader lounged back in a chair she’d crafted from toolplants.

A variety of teams and relationships, all of which just made Theodore smile. Standing on his broom, he flew up to the skies above.

“Sounds like everyone’s here to work! Positions, everyone! Before I call start, strategize however you like. The battle itself has already begun.”

Urged into action, the students started dashing toward their assigned areas. Once their teams were together, the supervisors began doling out instructions. The most obviously skilled of these was the old-council camp’s candidate, Percival Whalley.

“We’re after three types of plant exclusively! Group A, take Area One and Group B, Area Two. Before you go to weed, cast a mild liquifying spell on the whole section. We’re shooting for these targets!”

He was writing on the ground at his feet as he spoke. Third-year teams had plenty of experience on the second layer and needed only minimal instructions. He turned from them to the second-years.

“Groups C and D, you’ll be splitting Area Three. Second-years are unavoidably slower than the older students, so focus on careful work over rushing through things. Given the handicap, that should easily put you in range of a prize!”

A plan formed on reasonable performance expectations, accounting for the difference in school years, and doing what he could to smooth out their progress in their respective areas—the kind of management that made work easier.

From the next section over, fellow supervisor Miligan was watching Whalley, impressed by his practiced ease.

“He’s sure making snappy work of it,” she said. “Really shines when he’s in charge of crowds.”

“What do we do?”

“Have you got it broken down like him?”

Miligan had yet to lift a finger, and the teams before her were starting to frown. She turned toward them, smiling and shaking her head.

“No need. Just make sure you aren’t hitting the same areas. I do recommend focusing on high-scoring plants, but I’ll leave the details to you.”

“Uh, you sure?”

“We won’t be as fast.”

They blinked, looking back and forth between Whalley’s section and theirs. But Miligan simply raised an index finger.

“Ten thousand belc for each point you earn.”

Time stopped. It took several seconds before the meaning of that string of sounds sank in. Miligan’s smile broadened, and she added the explanation they were hoping for.

“In addition to the reward the school offers, I’ll be offering my own bonus to each team. Unrelated to the rankings in this competition. And you will be paid by end of day tomorrow.”

A ridiculously generous offer, and the eyes before her were starting to sparkle. Clearly much more motivated than a moment before, so she threw one last log on the fire.

“A verbal contract, but I’m a candidate—which means I must be true to my word. I trust that’s good enough?”

At this point, Theodore sounded the competition start. Miligan’s team took off like starving animals.

“Rahhhhhh!”

“Hunt, hunt, hunt!”

“Gimme that belc!”

Eyes gleaming with greed scoured the ground. No one mocked the lawn-mowing here; as far as they were concerned, there was pure gold sprouting from the earth. What could well have been hard work for nothing was now a paying gig, and Miligan’s offer had made a world of difference. The teams on either side picked up on that momentum and paused to stare.

“Wh-what’s with them?”

“They’re *really* into this.”

Everyone gawked for a minute. These teams weren’t particular into the whole concept. Even with some high reward on offer, those went to only three teams. Anyone unused to this sort of work never had a real shot, leaving their labor uncompensated. Miligan had upended that, offering a guaranteed reward and one far higher than the work deserved.

And with them working the way she wanted, the Snake-Eyed Witch took that as a cue to taunt her rival.

“Narrowing the goals, assigning the areas, improving work efficiency! You really are a marvelous talent, Mr. Whalley! Most impressive. So by the book I simply had to stifle a yawn. If you want praise for those methods, perhaps you should transfer to Featherston.”

“Damn it, Miligan!” Whalley snapped, having probed her intent. “You’re bribing juniors?”

“My, how you twist things. I simply offered appropriate payment for services rendered!”

“That’s bullshit and you know it! This isn’t any old lawn-mowing! Have you forgotten the election rules? Paying for votes is a clear violation! You *will* be penalized!”

“Don’t be absurd, Mr. Stickler. This is a competition! A sporting event entirely unrelated to the election. And the instructor himself said to strategize however we like! I heard not one word against offering additional rewards. I’ll have you refrain from bad-faith interpretations based purely on your unsubstantiated biases.”

That made Whalley’s protests die on his lips. Theodore’s rundown had simply said “*demonstrate leadership skills.*” He had not mentioned doing so as part of the ongoing election. But at this stage of the election, there could be no other reason for that—and he felt it was worth getting a verdict. He glanced up at Theodore and found the ringlet instructor looking rather at a loss.

“Hmm...I do see where Mr. Whalley is coming from, but...I was the one who said ‘however you like.’ It’s our fault for slapping together an event with such half-baked rules, but exploiting those loopholes is frankly a very Kimberly move. Is that not your own stance? In light of that, and given that Ms. Miligan is *not* specifically soliciting votes here, I’ll allow it.”

“Tch—”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Allow sense to seep into that hard head of yours, Mr. Whalley! This, this here is the Kimberly way! If you’re only just realizing that for the first time, I’m afraid you’re hardly ready to serve as president.”

Getting the call she’d expected elicited a titanic peal of laughter. Objectively speaking, Miligan looked the spitting image of the wicked witches in ordinaries’ folk tales, and one might be forgiven for checking to see if her tongue was forked. Katie, who was working in the Snake-Eyed Witch’s area, was left clutching her head.

“...Guy, why am I backing her, again?”

“Don’t think, Katie! Just work!”

“We’re after the regulation faculty rewards! Just convince yourself of that for now!”

Pete was already focused on the task at hand. True enough, given the research on her plate, Katie needed all the funding she could get. She balanced that against her guilty conscience and reached for the nearest plant.

“...Uh...”

“They’re going wild over there.”

In another supervisor’s area, the teams were giving the other participants dubious looks. Tim glanced over once, then shrugged.

“Forget ’em. Just do whatever. If you wanna go for the reward, feel free; if not, just score enough points so you don’t look lazy. It may be some dumbass weeding project but remember, there’s a teacher watching. It might affect his opinion of you.”

They blinked at that reminder. Tim wasn’t blatantly winding them

up but simply pointing out there probably was an unofficial minimal work threshold. Another viable approach to leadership.

And that wasn't all he'd done. At the start sign, his spell had crafted several large basins. These were filled with potions, diluted with water from the creeks in his area. He jerked a thumb at those.

"Wash your hands in these every twenty minutes. Every fifteen if you're a try-hard. Lots of the target plants are poisonous, and if you don't watch yourself, you'll end up with welts everywhere."

"Ugh, seriously?"

"I'm *definitely* washing up..."

"Same."

"If we miss the award and wind up with throbbing hands, this'll be a real shit show."

They all dashed off to the basins, grateful that Tim had spared a thought for the post-competition care. And then he called out one last warning.

"The layer's still unstable, too. Stare at the ground too much and you'll get hit from your blind spot. That's all from me."

"Okay!"

"We'll keep an eye out!"

The students nodded. Aware he was thinking of their safety first, they felt their opinions of him skyrocketing. Watching all this from above, Theodore was equally curious.

"Not what I expected from him. What brought this on?"

The Toxic Gasser had long cultivated a fearsome reputation, yet now he was making a major change. This didn't seem like a fleeting performance with the elections approaching; if he'd been capable of that, he'd have gone for it long ago. Which meant something significant had inspired real growth. Something that made Tim Linton want to step out from being Godfrey's sidekick and be a mentor on his own. Theodore didn't know who'd caused this but commended them on a job well done.

"...Hmm."

A twinge hit him from another direction, and he swung toward it: where Team Ames was pushing into the thick of the forest, in search of further prey.

"...This is more enjoyable than I had imagined," Jasmine Ames whispered, smoothly pulling a target plant from the ground. She'd been forced into this landscaping exercise, but it suited her disposition—once she got working, she began to enjoy herself.

While she was quietly plugging away, her teammates were going full-out.

“Rahhhhhhh! Bring me dat belc!”

“Gonna get our Jaz dem good eats!”

They were visibly fired up. Miligan’s offer might not apply to them, but they’d also spent a small fortune to prep for the league. And they felt the need to support their leader—especially given that they’d largely dragged her down in the actual match. Both were good kids at heart.

“Whoa, it’s huge!”

“Careful! If that snaps, it’s worth nothing!”

Certain they had a score, they were upending the soil around them. Ames turned to help but then spotted something big coming through the brush beyond them.

“___?! Watch out—there’s something coming!”

“Huh?”

“Hah?”

They turned to look, eyes wide—and a wyvern’s face emerged from the bushes. Or what was left of it: Half had been melted off. The sinister glow of a breath attack was reddening its maw. A turn so unexpected, it stunned Ames’s companions. She leaped forward to protect them, but the wave of brutal heat bore down upon them.

The roar of it shook the layer. Every student present stopped and turned to look.

“Yikes—”

“What the—?”

“An explosion?”

“On your guard! What’s going on?”

“Stop work! Bad news!”

Whalley and Miligan both put their teams on emergency alert—but by the time the smoke cleared, the matter was resolved. The wyvern was frozen like a statue, slammed head-on by a spell of the oppositional. The ringlet instructor’s work, having swooped in on his broom.

“The four of you are unharmed, I trust?”

Certain the threat was neutralized, he turned to the students behind him. Team Ames, looking stunned—and Tim Linton, who’d leaped between them and the wyvern. The start of the breath attack had burned the left shoulder of his customized uniform, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“I’m good. Nobody here’s hurt, right?”

“...Oh...”

“...The poison dude?”

Realizing he’d stepped in to save them, Team Ames collectively goggled. Certain everyone was safe, Theodore heaved a sigh of relief.

“Looks like one brought in for the prelim was still kicking. My

apologies. Entirely our fault.”

“No biggie,” Tim said, brushing the cinders off his shoulder. “That’s why you’re on watch here, right?”

“My thanks to you, Mr. Linton.” Ames bowed, expressing her gratitude. “I thought I was done for.”

“Nah. The instructor took it down. All I did was get myself burned.”

“And in return, none of us was harmed. Allow me to offer healing. The least I can do.”

“Ah, wait, Jaz!”

“We’ll do that!”

Realizing they should have been the first to thank him, her backup crew drew their wands.

“Now, now,” Theodore said. “I’ll take care of things here. You get back to the competition. That’s why Linton was keeping you safe, after all.”

They weren’t about to argue with a teacher, so they thanked Tim once more and went back to work. Certain they’d moved on to a location with better visibility, Theodore turned to the Toxic Gasser next to him.

“...You kept your eyes peeled the moment they went into the thicker brush, didn’t you?”

“Don’t. Just hurry up and heal me.”

Tim sullenly proffered his burned shoulder, refusing to engage. Laughing, Theodore hopped off his broom and made the burns right as rain.

“...Fancy that,” Stacy whispered. “He never seemed the type to look after anyone.”

Like the prelim, the competition was broadcast via projector crystals in the larger classrooms. Groups of friends gathered here and there, Stacy among them. Oliver sat nearby, and he just smiled, shaking his head.

“Not true,” he said. “Mr. Linton’s always been there in a pinch.”

“Exactly,” Chela agreed. “But he’s more obvious about it now, and I suspect that may be your influence, Oliver.”

“? Really?”

He looked taken aback. His lack of self-awareness struck her as adorable, and Chela spontaneously threw her arms around him. Oliver let her, albeit not without reservations. This seemed like her usual friendly embrace, although given how the combat league had ended for her, he knew she needed the moral support.

“...But is Miligan really capable of that? It sure made an impact,

but even ballpark math suggests she's going to owe them a fortune. From what Katie's said, she's not exactly loaded..."

"Yes, so I'm sure she'll have to borrow it. Given the state of the league, she's likely decided the risk is worthwhile. Many election candidates have dropped out, and she has a real shot at pulling off the win. Mr. Whalley's a fifth-year, so she won't be facing him directly in the finals—therefore, any chance to orchestrate a direct comparison of their leadership skills is invaluable. She must have assumed she'll get what she's paying for."

Chela's explanation made a lot of sense. Borderline illegal approaches that would be frowned upon in elections elsewhere were entirely viable here, especially if you were the first in. They were a tad more underhanded about it, but the old-council camp was skirting the letter of the rules all the time. Theodore was well aware of that, which was another reason for him not chastising her here.

With the wyvern attack dispatched, the contestants were on the move again. Chela tore her eyes from the screen, released Oliver from her long embrace, and put her hand on her hip.

"Either way, our part in this long combat league comes to a close today. Once our friends come back, we must hold a party. Tonight we shall celebrate."

"Hmph," Stacy grumbled. "Must be nice, having a champion to celebrate."

"Stace...", Fay said, sighing. "You don't need to turn everything into a pissing contest."

Chela turned a beaming smile toward them.

"Don't be silly," she said. "You're both coming tonight."

"Huh?"

"Why are you surprised? This is *our* party, too. There is absolutely no reason why my team would ever be left out. I shall not allow you to skip this one! I haven't showered nearly enough praise on your efforts."

Chela started advancing upon them, her smile intimidating. Stacy darted this way and that, a bit overwhelmed.

"Uh...b-but I—I barely know anyone except you..."

"Then 'tis the perfect opportunity!"

She'd tried to squirm away but found Nanao blocking her path. Fay put an arm firmly around her shoulders.

"Give it up, Stace. This time, I *will* tie a rope around you and drag you there."

"Fay?! You too?!"

"You promised you'd make some friends in class. We can't depend on Lady Michela forever."

He looked her right in the eye, hardening his heart. Stacy was left

without a leg to stand on and let out a moan. Her eyes wavered a moment longer, and then at last she steeled her nerves.

“...Fine, I’ll be there! If you insist!”

“At last! Sorry, Horn. Hate to be a burden.”

“Not at all. You were *always* welcome. I’d love to hear more about your research—obviously, only what you’re able to share. I watched the match recordings and couldn’t believe my eyes.”

“Exactly! I ’ave been wanting to ask the same thing.”

A blithe voice broke in, and Chela blinked at the source.

“...Mr. Rossi?” she said. “Why are you here?”

“Such ’ostility! I swear, you are all far too ’arsh on me. As ’ard as I ’ave worked, I think I deserve a spot ’ere.”

“No time.”

A large hand clapped down on Rossi’s collar, and he slowly turned to find Joseph Albright, his brow visibly throbbing.

“We’ve got a postmortem, remember? Don’t go double-booking yourself while you’re in my line of sight.”

“N-noooo! I ’ave to party! Please ’ave mercy, big man!”

“Gnostic Hunter policy: Never lend an ear to desperate begging. Forgive the intrusion; I’ll ensure it doesn’t happen again.”

Albright dragged Rossi’s yowling self out of the room. Oliver shook his head.

“...Already poring back over their mistakes? They sure are dedicated.”

“That’s one of Rick’s strengths. But I suspect you’d best be ready, Oliver.”

“? For what?”

“You’ll find out soon enough what it means to be Rick’s friend.”

Chela’s smile was rather ominous. Oliver cocked his head at that, but then the ringlet girl began scanning the room. Given the nature of this bonus competition, the crowd wasn’t exactly stressing things—but with nothing better to do until the senior league resumed, there were plenty of students here to kill the time, and the noise level was pretty high. Unable to locate the one she sought, Chela put the question to Oliver.

“I haven’t seen Mr. Leik. Is this his standard wanderlust? He *will* be there for the party, yes?”

“...Probably. But I can’t make promises. Seemed like he’d grasped something vital in that last match. Not sure if that’s why, but...he’s been acting funny.”

Oliver had noticed that much shortly after the match ended.

Chela winced, nodding, then looked back at the screen.

“They’re wrapping up. I wonder how our friends did?”

On the second layer, a horn sounded the end of the competition, and most participants crumpled to the ground where they stood, having worked themselves to the bone.

“Landscaping is good exercise!” a familiar voice called from the announcer’s booth in the classrooms above. “Moving right to the results of the junior league bonus round! Which team got their hands dirty the best?”

You could tell Glenda was eager to find out herself. She checked over the numbers sent from below and was ready to go.

“In third place—our two second-year teams! Team Carste and Team Echevalria! They’ll be splitting the prize and getting half a million belc each! Both worked hard, but the scary part? Team Echevalria’s leader, Ms. Felicia—she didn’t move at all! She’s not Mr. Leoncio’s sister for nothing. Even at her age, she’s mastered the art of making others work for her!”

This appraisal merely made Felicia snort, lounging comfortably in her toolplant chair. Her servants were collapsed at her feet, breathing heavily. Team Carste was gazing at them from a distance.

“She really didn’t lift a finger... Loops back around to impressive.”

“Mm. And we went all out, too...”

“My hands hurt.”

As Dean and Rita whispered to each other, Teresa just held up her swollen hands.

“Acceptable results,” Felicia said, looking down at her minions. “But how long are you just going to lie there?”

“Pardon us!”

“Your orders?”

Her teammates sprang to their feet, saluting. Felicia smiled and tossed a little pot with a handmade salve inside their way. They caught it, weeping tears of rapturous joy.

Aha, Dean thought. *She did have a carrot ready*. He was oddly relieved.

“In second place! With a huge lead over third, we have Team Aalto! Mr. Greenwood really knows his magiflora, and his knack for swiftly locating clusters of the target plants played a major role in this outcome! I thought as much in the free-for-all, but this team sure shines in the wild! Can’t wait to see how they build on that! Let’s hope this three million belc helps!”

All three breathed a sigh of relief. Finally free of her labors, Katie gazed blearily at the sky above.

“...I’m so tired...”

“Yeah, but it was worth it! Three mil!”

“I can buy a lot of books with that.”

Guy and Pete were quietly pleased. They’d never expected to

profit off the combat league, so this just felt like free money. Granted, all three friends had a lust for knowledge that would soon flush every belc down the drain.

“And last but not least, first place! Who came out on top in this swirling morass of greed? Team Mistral! They had all three members *and* his corporeal splinters going all out, pillaging that forest with terrifying verve! Let’s hope they keep this dedication and go for the big prize in the next league! Come and get your six million belc!”

With their victory assured, Mistral’s teammates looked up from the ground where they sat. They *were* pleased, just too exhausted to express it. Certain they weren’t just hearing things, they looked to their leader—who was lying flat on his face, not moving at all.

“Yo, Mistral... Nope, he’s dead.”

“It was a dead heat with Team Aalto, but we managed to pull ahead...except that six mil is split evenly with Team Ames and Team Liebert. If we’d known this was the competition, we wouldn’t have formed an alliance...”

Their insurance policy had come back to bite them on the ass. Since they’d had no clue what the bonus round involved until they saw the target list, they just had to write this one off as bad luck.

As the teams made their peace with the outcome, Glenda launched into her wrap-up.

“With the bonus round settled, the combat league lower forms division is at an end! From the prelims through the finals, it was all top-tier stuff and makes yours truly eager to see what this future will bring! Great work, everyone! Thanks for giving us all a show!” With that, she added, “The senior league finals await! Your juniors busted their butts, so you’d best not let them show you up! That’s all from me—I’ll spend the next three days imagining the greatness to come!”

The evening arrived. Tables laden with piles of food and drink carried from the Fellowship to a common room they had functionally all to themselves. Surrounded by invited guests, the party about to begin.

“...*Ahem*. Um, so, let’s make it official!” Katie said, clearing her throat and raising a mug brimming with white grape juice. “Oliver, Nanao, Mr. Leik—who’s running late and not here yet, but whatever! Congrats on winning the combat league! Cheers to Team Horn’s hard-fought battle and ultimate victory!”

With that, everyone clinked glasses, drops of clear liquid flying. Guy chugged most of his mug right away, then slammed it down on the table.

“That was *insane*!” he raved. “My guts were tying themselves in knots from the first match on!”

“Same,” Pete said, wincing, mug in hand. “Honestly, even if we’d made it there, we couldn’t have won. Really drove home how the free-for-all format helped us out...”

“I wouldn’t dare diminish the level of the final teams,” Chela said. “But the three of you are hardly that far behind. Using the terrain and ecosystem is vital in any real-world combat scenario. And by demonstrating that, you’ve ensured many more students will wish to incorporate those strategies in years to come.”

“Verily. Should the opportunity present itself, I would love to fight alongside you two.”

“Oh, really? Then let’s team up next time!”

Katie’s face glowed. She grabbed Nanao’s hands, doing a little dance. Chela’s smile grew extra warm, and then she turned to their guests.

“Every single person here’s league performance raised their profiles. And that includes you, Team Carste.”

She looked to the younger trio. Dean almost spat out his juice. He hastily wiped his lips with his sleeve. He and Rita turned toward their hosts.

“All I did was fail to get the drop on someone...”

“And I got used as a human shield! I’m so sorry, Greenwood...”

“Gah, you’re both a bunch of sad sacks! Especially you, Rita! Don’t you dare apologize again! I messed up there, too, okay? Next time, I’ll do a better job coming to the rescue.”

As he spoke, Guy ran around the table, rubbing his knuckles on both juniors’ heads. Leaning into the rough kindness, Rita looked up through her lashes at him.

“...So you’ll come save me again?”

“Huh? Damn straight. Who d’you take me for?”

“...Eh-heh-heh.”

He was just stating the obvious, but Rita couldn’t stop herself from giggling. Oliver smiled at that, then turned to the girl hovering next to him.

“...Teresa, what are your thoughts on the match?”

“Nothing of much import. At most, I should have chosen better teammates.”

“Gah...!”

“Aughhh...!”

A brutal backhanded blow that left both Dean and Rita writhing. Oliver swiftly moved to object.

“I wouldn’t say that. Certainly, you’re the standout, but Mr. Travers and Ms. Appleton both have their strengths. If they failed to capitalize on them, your first regret should be a lack of proper planning.”

“...Hrm.”

“Matching the timing of your attacks to the beasts and Mr. Travers’s surprise attack from beneath the water. Both of those could’ve paid off with one further wrinkle. And that includes your own performance. I bet you have thoughts along those lines. You know where and when you could have done more.”

Oliver kept one eye on her as he spoke. Her expression never changed, but he could tell this was the sort of silence that settled in when he’d hit the nail on the head.

He grinned and added, “You’ve got the decisiveness to seize an opportunity and plenty of courage. You’re a good team. Don’t measure them by these results alone. Rather, build on this to make all of you stronger. Do that and you’ll win next time.”

“...If you say so, then I’ll consider it. I certainly don’t enjoy defeat.”

Teresa took his advice to heart. Katie and Guy had been listening in and started whispering to each other.

“...Oliver’s extra hard on Teresa, huh?”

“Ya think? I’d say he’s going the extra mile. More like a dad than an upperclassman.”

“More like Teresa doesn’t listen to anyone but Mr. Horn,” Peter Cornish chimed in. “I mean, did you see how she reacted? We’d *never* get her to admit that.”

He was the last member of that second-year group and had been invited here with the league team. The most outgoing and sociable of them, he was easy to open up to. They started by talking about mutual friends, but it wasn’t long before the conversation started ranging free.

As the volume rose, Dean put his empty mug down and got to his feet, approaching Oliver.

“...Got a sec, Mr. Horn?”

“Mm? What is it, Mr. Travers?”

“Just Dean’s fine. Uh...so I watched the finals. It was a whole lot, and I know I missed a bunch, but, uh...it really got to me.”

He awkwardly scratched his head. Sensing this was leading up to something more serious, Oliver put down his glass and turned toward him.

“Well...I’m honored. Did it prove instructive?”

“It did. More like...I feel like I see a super-long-term goal now? I mean, you saw my match; I bet you could tell. My spells and swordplay are both mad sloppy. I’ve just been doing everything as an extension of back-alley punch-outs. But seeing your last battle...I started feeling like that won’t serve me well.”

“So you want to turn back and solidify your fundamentals?”

“Exactly. Which brings me to my question here—if you’re gonna

rebuild, where do you start? I mean, I'm all up for brutal training! Spirit and guts, I got in spades."

Dean spoke with fervor, and everyone listening looked tense.

"...You've stepped in it, kid," said Guy.

"Huh?"

"Nothing can save you now. Go on, Oliver. There's space over there."

Seeing where this was going, Chela waved them to the empty side of the room. Oliver nodded, grabbed Dean's wrist, and pulled him over.

"First, take a stance," he said, facing him once more. "Don't worry about textbook accuracy; just do what you always do."

"L-like this?"

"Mid-stance with an eye on grabs. So your main goal is to snatch the wrist to an underarm lock?"

"Y-you can tell?"

"If they don't close in, you tend to get hit with spells as they back away, right?"

"That too? From one stance?!"

"A stance has a lot more information in it than you imagine. Yet, disguising that is *also* the purpose of the stance. Take a look at mine. Basic Lanoff mid-stance. What can you tell from that?"

"Um...huh, not a lot."

"Exactly."

"What?"

"You don't know what I'm gonna do. Or put another way, I can do just about anything. That's the potential the Lanoff mid-stance harbors. The impression you voiced is the point. Let's take it a step further. How would you come after me in this stance? Not in words, go on and demonstrate. Like you mean it, no holding back."

That made Dean get his head on straight, realizing this was no lecture but a hands-on training exercise.

"Um...th-then...it's gonna be hard like this, so... Yikes?!"

"You tried to tap my athame and deflect the tip, yeah? I saw it coming, pulled my blade back out of your way, and cut your wrist on the counter. Nothing hard about it; from your stance, there's only so many quick moves you can take. If the options are limited, then all you need is to pay enough attention to spot which. Makes it easier to respond on the fly."

"Um, so then...I shouldn't give them that info?"

"That's one approach, but no matter how good you are, it's hard to hide everything. So I want you thinking a step deeper. If you can't hide it, how do you keep them from calling it?"

Oliver clearly wanted a real answer, so Dean thought long and

hard. Eventually, he reached a conclusion that felt worth venturing.

“...If I can’t hide...then I need *more*?”

“Correct. Always have multiple options and throw them at your foe. If they read it wrong, you can exploit that, and if not, well, you at least made them think, which slows their reaction speed. Human concentration is a finite resource. With blades or wands, robbing each other of that is the key to any battle.”

This came in through Dean’s ears and seeped into his mind—then his eyes went wide, and he stiffened like he’d been struck by lightning. Sensing the dawn of realization, Oliver pressed on.

“I’m betting you always went into fights with your mind made up, your move set in stone. That ain’t wrong for a street fight. Those aren’t about technique as much as they are whose nerves let them hit faster. But Kimberly students are always ready to throw down. They keep their nerves about ’em like a pocket handkerchief. Which means you’ve gotta have the strength that comes beyond that.”

“...Y-yeah. I feel like...you just changed my whole mindset.”

“That’s promising. From what I can tell, you’ve got the motivation and stamina to handle hard training. What you needed was an understanding of the task at hand. Now that piece has settled in, you’re gonna see rapid improvements. I guarantee it.”

Wrapping up, he gave Dean a pat on the shoulder. The boy quivered, and then his head snapped down.

“...Thankssomuch!”

With that profound expression of gratitude, Dean spun around and returned to the table. He made a beeline for his bored-looking teammate.

“Hey! Teresa! Hey, hey!” he said, visibly enthused.

“What now?”

“Mr. Horn’s awesome! He taught me for, like, one minute, and the fog totally lifted! I get why you’re so fond of him!”

“I was listening!” Rita said. “That was so clear and easy to follow! He knew right away what you needed to hear and got it across so fast... I can see why he won.”

She was giving Oliver a look of deep respect. Teresa glanced from one teammate to the other, and something clicked inside her head. She spun around, filled empty mugs with grape juice, and dropped them before her teammates.

“Dig in, Dean.”

“Y-yeah?”

“I take back what I said earlier. Mr. Horn’s right, and we should review our fight once more. Rita, you join us.”

“Uh, okay. Um—wait, Teresa...did you just use our *names*?!”

This hadn’t happened even once the entire time they’d known her;

they were both flabbergasted. Watching that from the sidelines, Peter's eyes went wide, and he whispered, "Oh..."

"? What's up, Peter? You look like someone threw a stone at a basilisk," said Guy.

"...I just figured out how to make friends with Teresa. You need common ground. The basic of all human interactions. But Teresa never talks about what it is she likes, so we never managed to find any. And that void just got filled."

A wealth of observation made the principle emerge—Peter sounded like a wizened academic. Guy and Chela both looked blank, and he turned red, speaking very fast.

"Mr. Horn. *That's* what Teresa likes. Probably the only thing she really does. If you know that, the rest is easy. We just have to be fans of him, too. If she gets that we admire and respect him, then suddenly we're her comrades. It all makes sense!"

Peter clenched a fist, certain he was on to something; he jumped up to his feet, heading for Oliver. Guy and Chela watched him go, stunned.

"Mr. Horn, talk to me, too! I've actually been a huge fan literally my entire life! Tell me everything there is to know about you!"

"Huh? Uh, I don't mind talking, but..."

Oliver appeared a bit rattled, yet he rolled with it. Peter's questions pelted him like a deluge.

"...He may not have joined the league," Guy said, "but he's just as kooky as the other three. I dig how he doesn't let the class difference bug him. The type that does well here."

"Indeed, he has the social skills. Something the other three lack, so he likely helps balance that out. I think the four of them will become a good team."

Getting a sense of her junior's strengths, Chela smiled, envisioning what the future might hold. And that gentle gaze drifted across the party to those seated next to her.

"Oh, look," she said. "We have someone else here who's not terribly social."

"...Urgh..."

Stacy ducked behind Fay's shoulder. But Guy slipped around to her other side.

"You haven't said a peep yet! No need to get all stiff here. We don't bite—and today, we ain't letting you off the hook."

Intentionally making it sound like a threat—one trick he used to push through reticence. Stacy got that on some level, but she still couldn't quite bring herself to just join in. She had so little experience talking to anyone but Fay without spite and rancor.

How best to get her to open up? Chela and Guy were both

searching for a way in, when the last person they'd expected came to back them up—Pete, who'd been quiet for some time.

"...Mind if I call you Stacy?"

"Hwuh?! Er, um, well...if you want to?"

Him calling her by name made her voice crack. She definitely remembered picking a fight with him in her first year, and she had imagined he'd been the last person to welcome her. But Pete nodded, stepping closer.

"Then I will. And you're fine with Fay? Call me Pete."

"Totally, Pete."

"Then let's talk. The partial werewolf transformation and simplification of the transformation process you demonstrated in the match really shocked me. I'd actually been looking at a similar approach myself, figuring problems long left unsolved are often cracked by perspectives *mag*es are blind to. Seems like I was on the money there, but you beat me to it... I'm kinda jealous."

"Um...you were researching werewolves?"

"That's a surprise. I had you pinned as a total magineering guy."

"I'm considering it, but I haven't learned enough yet to pick a single path. I'm digging into magical biology alongside the engineering, and I've read my share of works on werewolves. The major ones are *Bestial Metamorphoses*, *On the Lycanthrope Species*, and *The Beast That Lurks Among Us*. And I've also gone through *Moon Mana* and *Pros and Cons of Mixing Blood*. And...Ms. Vanessa helped me get a body to dissect. I did that with Katie."

"By your third year?! You aren't even majoring in it yet!"

"I knew you were knowledgeable, but not to this degree. Hats off."

"You've got your own body to learn from, and I can't compete with that. But since I do have a knowledge base to work from, I have at least some idea of what your successes entail. You went from a perception basis rather than a physical one, yes? That alone wouldn't explain everything, though. Specifically, there's several magic particles we've identified as a required part of the werewolf transformation—ones given off by the moon itself. Those can't be generated entirely on a perceptual plane. I'm curious as to how you managed to resolve that issue."

Pete had laid the groundwork for a more intrusive question. And those on the receiving end were all too happy to have their hard work recognized. The answer leaped to Stacy's lips, but she bit it back, glancing at her servant.

"Um...Fay, can we tell him?"

"Yeah, that's covered by the dissertation we already submitted."

"That's right! Okay, then—like you said, there are several magic particles required by the transformation. But with a little work, it's

possible to maintain a reserve of them within the body. I took a good look at how the spleen functions, and..."

Convinced there was no reason to couch anything in layman's terms, Stacy dove straight into the specialized knowledge. Pete followed it all, asking smart questions, keeping the conversation going. Chela and Guy exchanged smiles, deciding they could leave them to it. If the Sword Roses' prickliest member had broken the ice first, then the rest was a matter of time.

As new friendships arose, the last guest of honor came bounding into the room—Yuri Leik, badly out of breath.

"Sorry, sorry, I'm super late! Any food left?"

"A regular smorgasbord! Seat thyself here."

"There you are, Yuri! Where'd you wander off to this time?"

Nanao and Oliver quickly pulled him to their table. Yuri pounced on the spread, looking delighted.

"Oh, thank goodness! I'm absolutely famished. If you'd run out, I doubt I'd have made it to the store without collapsing! Ooh, I'm taking this whole plate."

Without waiting for permission, he dragged an entire lasagna dish his way and started eating directly out of it. Oliver shook his head; Yuri already had his cheeks stuffed like a chipmunk preparing to hibernate.

"Man, this is good! Never had anything like it! What's it called?"

"Um...?"

"That's standard meat-sauce lasagna. They have it in the Fellowship all the time."

Everyone blinked at him, and Yuri's hands froze. His voice turned unusually grim.

"...So I've had this before? You've seen me eat it more than once?"

"Well...yeah."

"What's wrong, Mr. Leik? Did you stumble upon some lethe lilies on the second layer?"

Katie came over to take a look, but Yuri shook her off.

"Nope, I'm good. I had a hunch this was going on."

With that loaded statement, the boy took another bite. Oliver had further questions, but before he could ask any, Yuri was talking again.

"Still, this party's really hopping! We've got Team Cornwallis and the second-years here, too? Awesome! I'm gonna make friends with *everyone*!"

"Pace yourself," Chela cautioned. "Lots of people find you hard to take at first."

"Yep. Don't be scared, second-years; he's unnaturally friendly in a way that reads fishy, but there's nothin' going on upstairs. He's all surface, like Nanao."

“Hrmph, I resent that implication,” Nanao said. “I am constantly in thought! For instance: At the moment, I am wondering how much of this meat I can claim without earning your ire—”

“Divide the whole by the number of people here and take no more than that, Nanao,” Oliver cut in. “Fine, you can have mine. Content yourself with that.”

They were soon caught up in the flow of conversation. It wasn’t long before Oliver’s doubts faded away. Then Rita came up carrying a plate. Nanao had polished off Oliver’s share of roast chicken already, and Rita offered up her own share, too.

“Er, um, Ms. Hibiya...you can have mine if we can talk a bit? Not just about the match. I also want to know more about Azian farming and food culture.”

“Hrm?! Nay, I can hardly rob the young of their nutrition. A warrior findeth virtue in starvation, though I do appreciate the offer.”

“You’ve been pigging out like crazy, though...”

“Nanao the carnivore...”

“Raised as a warrior, I’ll admit my knowledge of local agriculture is limited to rice, beans, buckwheat, and perhaps the potatoes grown in times of scarcity. Though the garden in our home played host to persimmon and chinquapin. Will that suffice?”

“Absolutely! Please tell me more!”

Beaming, Rita sat down next to Nanao, peppering her with questions on Yamatsu farming. Thus, the conversations never died, and the party remained in full swing.

Meanwhile, Theodore was kicking back alone in a top-floor meeting room. The door opened, and Demitrio came in, looking grim.

“How goes things, Instructor? What did your splinter report?”

“Nothing.”

Theodore raised an eyebrow, and the astronomy teacher elaborated.

“He did not appear at the location I’d imprinted. The urge to do so should be quite powerful, but he’s begun bucking it unconsciously. Perhaps the stimulus received during the league fights has advanced the irregularity.”

“So he’s escaping your control?” Theodore said, folding his arms. “That’s not good. We were learning so much from his point of view.”

Demitrio sighed. “The longer he spends with others, the more the weight of his experience grows, it seems. Either way, it is time I collect him. Pull him back into myself, tear apart his personality, clear the slate of his experience, and send him out again.”

“Will that work? That splinter was cultivating significant

relationships through his league teammates. If we negate all those gains, he'll suffer some significant impairments in communication."

"The adjustments will be difficult. Perhaps attempting to retain the same individual is ill-advised. But the change itself is curious. The like has not occurred before. I shall have to analyze the cause once I receive his final—"

He was interrupted by a powerful glow from the amethyst in the corner. These were kept in faculty rooms for communication with the outside. Theodore rose to his feet and moved over to it.

"Unusual. An urgent request from the Gnostic Hunter HQ. Let's see."

Drawing his white wand, he made to receive the contents—but Demitrio's wand touched the glow first. Information poured into his mind, and he quickly sorted through it.

"A request for aid from the divination division. They're predicting a mid-scale portal soon, narrowed down to a region to the northwest of here."

"And we're closest, so they want us fighting it. Which kind?"

Theodore settled back down on his chair. His question was always critical in these matters. There were two main types of portal incursions: migrations, where the passage was the result of species getting squeezed out or simply wandering too far from home, and apostles, which arrived with a specific plan of invasion. Both were threats, but the latter was at least two orders of magnitude more dangerous.

"Given the timing and location, HQ estimates a high probability of a spontaneous migration. I'm inclined to agree. The *tír* in proximity being what it is, threat levels are certainly high, but there's no real indication of Gnostic summoning."

"Well, no. Unless the Sacred Light wants an all-out war, there's no gain from opening a portal this close to us. And if it's just a migration, *she'll* get to go buck wild."

A flame appeared at the tip of Theodore's white wand, and he pulled a pipe from his pocket, lighting it.

"That does seem appropriate," Demitrio said, hand on his chin. "But I believe I'll join her."

"Oh? Something on your mind?"

"Vanessa's sloppy. Like that wyvern—don't need any spillage wandering around here. And if the headmistress approves, I'd like to take the students there. Good learning opportunity."

A bold proposal, and Theodore answered with a stream of smoke. Emotions mingled on his profile, but those ripples soon died down, and he flashed his default smile at his colleague.

"...True, there are precious few opportunities to see a portal open.

It'll be good for them. Emmy will likely be on board. Which years will you take? I do recommend leaving the lower forms behind."

"Third-years and up. Between Vanessa and myself, we can keep that number safe."

Demitrio spoke with confidence. It was certainly a drastic move, but Theodore voiced no objections. In terms of sheer time spent dealing with tír threats, this man was second only to Frances Gilchrist at Kimberly. Esmeralda and Theodore himself could hardly compete.

"I'll send word around when classes resume. Handle things while we're away, Theodore."

The ringlet instructor nodded.

What would the students accompanying him witness? What realities would they face? His own experiences gave him all too clear a picture.

The party ran on with no signs of dying down, but around ten PM, Chela made an executive decision to send them packing. They escorted the second-years out of the building, and Yuri flitted off somewhere. Stacy and Fay split from the rest of the group and headed for their labyrinth workshop, leaving only the Sword Roses on the road back to the dorms.

"That was a blast! A shame to let it end."

"True! I could have talked all night."

"Now, now, we might be up for that, but there were second-years present. And you had a rigorous competition just today. An early bedtime will do you a world of good. If you feel you missed out, you can simply further these friendships tomorrow."

Chela patted Guy and Katie on their backs, calming them down. Pete was walking with them but saying nothing, silently reviewing everything he'd learned from Stacy and Fay. This suggested he'd had fun in his own way.

Oliver and Nanao were walking side-by-side not far behind. Savoring the party's afterglow, Oliver said, "I'm glad we brought the others in. Did you enjoy having our juniors flock to you, Nanao?"

"But of course," she replied, flashing him a grin. "At long last, I had a chance to act the mentor."

Looking ahead, Oliver spotted a strange protrusion in the ground—one that hadn't been there that morning.

"Huh, that's weird. Was someone practicing spells here? Of all places, too..."

He drew his white wand. The others had passed by without noticing the bump, but anyone walking on the wrong side of the path could easily trip over it. Best to flatten it out now.

But before he could cast a spell, Nanao stepped forward and without a word kicked the protrusion. It shattered violently, the wind sweeping away the shards, which vanished in a single blow.

“It is dispatched. Will that do?”

“Uh, yeah...,” he managed, frozen to the spot.

But inside, he was shaken. Nanao? Taking things out on random objects? Had she *ever* done that before? Been this obviously irritable where he could see?

The others glanced back, but Nanao waved them off like nothing was wrong. They moved on, yet Oliver was tensing up. He’d felt something off that morning, and that impression was only getting worse.

She hadn’t been quite herself. Not while they were watching the bonus competition, nor at the party. Not that she hadn’t enjoyed her time with friends and company, but if you watched closely, Nanao had been on edge all day long. Lashing out at the bump had been an extension of the same.

“Uh, Nanao...maybe my mind’s playing tricks on me, but is something—?”

He’d been about to ask what had her so angry when he was abruptly assaulted by her lips.

“.....?!”

His eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. Before he could respond at all, she’d pushed him off the path into the nearby trees. He staggered, and his back hit a trunk, which she used as leverage to deepen the contact.

This was less a kiss than the feasting of a carnivore. Her ardor seeped through his membranes like molten lava, banishing all thought from his mind. A shudder of fear, mingled with an all-too-intense wave of lust. Oliver’s every fiber tensed, incapable of motion. Second after second passed, lost to the moment—and at last, she broke it off.



“Oliver...”

The word escaped her like the rantings of the delirious, both struggling to catch their breath. Neither one had dared inhale the entire time their lips were locked. The passion she had poured into him had been enough to restore some level of thought, and like heated iron squeezed from her parched throat, she managed to place words upon her tongue.

“Your fate lies with *me*.”

His heart stopped. In an instant, he knew what drove those words, this abrupt aggression.

The league’s final duel, himself against Richard Andrews. Layer upon layer of emotions and history, brought to a head in the match they’d both been longing for. Nanao herself had unfortunately run out of energy before it happened and collapsed upon the floor—where she had lain and *watched*. On the same stage, but unable to move, their blows just out of reach yet seared into her eyes as she gasped and moaned. Cursing her limbs for their refusal to rise, the purest form of agony the likes of which she had never experienced. A previously untouched realm of extreme emotion spitting the foundations of her heart’s equanimity, birthing hell within her. Flames gone past orange and blue to purest white, the incinerating heat of her own *envy*.

“If this fate comes not to fruition, so be it. If you go out and duel another, I will not mind. But I cannot abide the notion of being forgotten. The soul most drawn to your blade lies *here*. That fact alone you must keep ever in the recess of your mind. There for all of time, no matter whose blade you face.”

Nanao’s plea itself was like a dagger carving words into his heart. As if she needed that brand upon him or she could not bear to release her hold on him for the slightest moment. Yearning to carve her way into her beloved, or, barring that, at least pull him down and have her way with him. She had no other means of resisting that urge. The look of despair those acts would no doubt incur was itself alluring—he could imagine that all too well.

“...Ah...”

Oliver stood stock-still, at a loss for words. An unguarded moment that made her want to steal his lips once more, a lust forcing its way up from the pit of her abdomen. Barely cutting that urge down with the last of her reason, Nanao abruptly turned her back.

“An unseemly act. I will accept all reproaches and recriminations, but leave them for tomorrow, when cooler heads prevail.”

The closest to a defense she could muster. She moved to leave but drew up short not five paces hence. Must she compound her sin? Appalled at her own behavior, yet she could not leave it unsaid.

“My heart lies with you, Oliver. For every moment, sleeping or

awake, from now until evermore.”

Not one word of hyperbole, simply the plainest of truths. This time the girl did leave, and Oliver watched her go without a word—until his back slid down the trunk behind.

The morning dawned bright. Students filed into the building like always and were eating breakfast when mouths opened on the walls.

“Announcement for all students and staff. A portal is expected to open in an area to the northwest of campus. The Gnostic Hunters HQ has requested assistance from our faculty, and in accordance with that request, we will be bringing students years three and up to the scene. This is a rare opportunity, so participation should be considered mandatory unless you have a commitment you absolutely cannot get out of. Departure will be an hour after first period ends, so be at the school gates ten minutes prior. Makes yourselves ready, and bring your brooms.”

A stir went around the Fellowship. The Sword Roses were all frowning. Within the Kimberly walls was fraught with danger enough, but this presented a rare exterior threat. The only ones looking blank were first-years who hadn’t started astronomy yet; everyone else looked rather grim.

“...A portal in these parts?” Chela said. “That’s almost unheard of. Which means it’s likely a spontaneous migration.”

“If they’re taking students along, it must be,” Oliver agreed. “But those predictions aren’t foolproof. Be ready for anything.”

His gaze caught Nanao’s for a moment, but each jerked their eyes away. Katie and Guy picked up on this and exchanged concerned glances. They wanted to dig further, but the situation didn’t allow it. They’d have to get through this field trip first.

“A migration... We covered ’em in astronomy, but I ain’t never seen one. What tír is it coming from?”

“Given the current celestial positions, the closest tír would be Uranischegar, the Regimented Heavens. Odds are high that’s where this portal will connect.”

“That’s a pretty weird one, right?” Katie asked. She shivered. “Ooh, I’m getting nervous. I know the teachers will keep us safe, but...”

Nanao put a hand on her shoulder, already braced for combat. She glared up at the rafters.

“Visitors from the great beyond! We shall see if it be snake, or it be devil.”

With the first class done, students gathered by the gates as instructed. Demitrio quickly took attendance—confirming his splinter was not among them.

“...Thought not,” he muttered. “Likely has no intention of showing himself before me again.”

This came as no surprise. He put the matter out of his mind, moving to the head of the student body and leading them into the sky. Vanessa accompanied them, sprouting wings of her own—which shocked absolutely nobody. In this situation, her inhumanity was almost a comfort.

A flight just shy of thirty minutes took them to the portal’s expected location. They were matching the flight speed of the youngest students here, so the formation didn’t spread itself out. Everyone landed at roughly the same time and examined the terrain. A broad open field, largely even, as far as the eye could see. The grass covering the plain was low—a relief, since they need not be concerned about things hiding or ambushing them.

“We’ll form ranks here. Unless otherwise directed by a faculty member, once the barrier is up, do not step outside of it. That is not a warning but an order. If a fool gets themselves killed, that’s one thing, but the consequences here could be far more devastating.”

Demitrio was already nailing that point home. They lined up as instructed, and the Sword Roses took stock of the faces around. Since attendance was compulsory, they recognized everyone—but the face you noticed first in any crowd was not among them.

“...So no Yuri, huh?” Guy asked.

“Yeah, hard to believe,” Oliver said. “He’s always late, but he’s also first in line for anything this unusual.”

They’d met during first period, so this wasn’t a matter of delving too deep to hear the news. Perhaps he wanted to be here but had reason to stay away—the thought did cross Oliver’s mind, but there seemed no use dwelling on it now. He and his friends focused on the task at hand.

“Formation complete,” Demitrio called. “Remain in position on standby until the portal opens. The margin of error on these can be a few hours in either direction. Until the warning signs are observed, I’ll be lecturing you on Gnostic Hunter fieldwork.”

Rows of students stood facing the plain, and Demitrio was using his wand’s amplification spell to speak. Before they saw the evidence for themselves, it was best to set the stage. They’d heard much of it before, but he felt it bore repeating.

“The rules *here* are pure and simple. See the enemy, kill them. Unless specifically directed to observe or capture, anything that comes through, no matter what—make it dead. Appearances, communicative

abilities, whether it seems friendly—none of those things are worth considering. *Do not engage.*”

He began with the iron rule. When you got right down to it, everything else he said was merely a means of driving home this one principle. What Demitrio sought here was to temporarily turn his students into killing machines, the rest left by the wayside.

“The only time we leave things alive without specific orders is when our combat abilities are deemed inadequate to complete the task. In that case, a swift retreat is followed by a return to the scene with a better plan. Rinse and repeat until everything is annihilated,” Demitrio explained. “One thing to be cautious of here is that the definition of death varies by the things that come through. Severing the head may not suffice. There’s no guarantee the brain and heart are vital organs. You might pulverize a thing only to find it reassembles and starts moving again. Remember this: Here, death is defined as rendering your targets incapable of acting.”

He was making sure no one could possibly misinterpret him. Seeing one girl start to frown, Demitrio focused on her.

“Something on your mind, Ms. Aalto? Go on—speak.”

With that, Katie threw up her hand in response. Not letting her emotions drag her around, she took a moment to put together a logical argument.

“...Yes, sir. So, I’m well aware that Gnostic Hunters work in severe circumstances, but ruling out any attempt at friendship or even attempting communication sounds inherently irrational. That approach prevents us from ever learning more about what’s going on in their worlds. Especially if we want to prevent these invasions, securing and questioning prisoners seems like an appropriate action.”

She kept her tone level, working through her response one step at a time, being as persuasive as she could currently muster. Demitrio could tell she’d worked long and hard to get here.

“You certainly have learned how to choose your words, Ms. Aalto,” he said with a snort. “Quite an improvement from your first year, when you could hear the echoes in your skull.”

“I learned that approach would get me nowhere with you, so I’ll take this as a compliment.”

She didn’t sound terribly appreciative. She was still just as bitterly opposed to his philosophies, as evidenced by her undaunted attitude. Internally, he approved of her strength and the goodness of her heart.

“Let’s go through that question in order. First, attempting to learn more about the inner workings of the tir. Naturally, the Gnostic Hunters *are* doing that. Like you suggested, carefully selected targets with communication skills are occasionally questioned, and arguably this has even achieved a level of success. In particular, we’ve learned a

good deal about the intelligent species on Marcurius. Enough that in the distant past, they even explored the option of diplomatic ties.”

Katie nodded, well aware of this. Even if they came from other worlds, she wasn’t convinced that they were inherently unknowable monsters. There had to be a path toward understanding, and she firmly believed this lied in the tireless efforts of the observer. At the very least, she felt this was true for any species in *this* world. From fairies smaller than a grain of sand to a colossal behemoth, they all had reasons to be the shape they were. And it was an academic’s role to work that out.

That stance was an ideal, one even a child could grasp. But that was exactly *why* Demitrio responded with the harsh nature of reality.

“But there are far more cases where that approach has backfired, enough to blot out all those successes. We cannot even count the number of tragedies brought about by trusting the apostles. For a recent example—well, I’m sure *you* know one, Ms. Aalto.”

“.....!”

That hit her where it hurt, stifling her arguments. The one thing she couldn’t speak out on, since her own parents had been involved. The tragedy that had forced the Aalto mages out of the limelight—like Demitrio said, it was a prime example of how her suggestions could backfire.

“Why do these things occur? The answer is the crux of the problem. The capacity for communication itself makes them more dangerous. Highly intelligent creatures making contact with us is an inherently attractive proposition. They hide their true purpose behind an appealing facade, cleverly twist words to their own ends—leading us to our own destruction by the most devious means. That is the essence of the creatures we call apostles. Any relationships developed along the way are merely tools to further their purpose. No matter how dazzling the hope they *seem* to offer.”

This instructor rarely spoke with such passion. In no way was this merely imparting arguments he’d heard about secondhand; this was the wisdom of a man whose lived experience had brought him to this inescapable truth. It was underwritten with an unmeasurable remorse. Rivers of blood, innumerable losses, and the bottomless horror of the man forced to bear the burden of them all. Katie’s throat seized up because she knew full well she had no equivalent history.

“Whatever shape it may take, the moment contact is established with a tír life-form, the invasion has already begun. You must not allow them to establish a foothold in our world. You must not allow anyone to attune themselves to these alien thoughts. This is why we forbid attempts at communication and intentionally shut them out. It is safer to fight them than to *talk*. Do you understand me, Ms. Aalto?”

His logic clear, he sought confirmation. As if her skull had turned to lead, Katie's head began to dip—but a last burst of willpower kept it level. She recognized the weight of his words. But she could not bring herself to nod as long as any doubt remained within.

"Everything you've said makes sense. But there is one point I'm stuck on: Creatures from the *tír* always arrive with ill intent, without so much as a single exception. Instructor Aristides, your argument and conclusions are based upon that pretext."

A vain argument akin to the devil's proof. Ashamed of herself for voicing it, yet she clung to the faint hope it would lead to something. Katie would hardly have complained if it were dismissed out of hand, yet contrary to her fears, Demitrio's brow twitched.

"...Ill intent, hmm? One of the most terrifying things about apostles is how they warp our own ability to determine right from wrong. But I know what you're trying to say. Not every creature from a *tír* is necessarily consciously trying to invade us. There must be some exceptions. That's really what you mean, yes?"

Katie nodded, flummoxed by all this. Demitrio's gaze turned skyward, and he let out a long sigh.

"I cannot refute that claim. From the historical effects on our ecosystem, not all migrations' impact can be deemed purely negative—I taught you that myself. You may use those cases as contrary evidence, and logically speaking, claiming every microorganism has conscious intent is inherently absurd. They cross over to our world for a myriad of reasons, and a great many of them are simply adhering to the survival instinct." He went on. "But realistically speaking—we have no real way of distinguishing. Even consulting historical records, we cannot begin to predict the consequences of *tír* beings upon our world. And those with the arrogance to assume *they* could, that they knew better...are responsible for some of the most irreparable catastrophes."

Here, his lips pursed. Few students could make it out, and the expression vanished as soon as it appeared—but that was directed inward. Neither mocking nor ridiculing their foolish acts but a kick aimed squarely at his own posterior, though the world might now number him among their philosophers.

"The existence of ill intent is not vital to the problem at hand. Even if a creature arrived here harboring indisputable benevolence, I'm sure you can easily imagine how their actions would nevertheless cause untold destruction. Perhaps even the apostles behind history's most notorious tragedies did not approach us with malice in their hearts. Many of them have offered *salvation* when rallying the Gnostics to their cause. That salvation merely proved our undoing—nothing more, nothing less."

The irony of this was not lost on Katie, and her fists balled up tight. One eye on that, Demitrio brought the topic back to his original conclusion.

“None of that changes anything. Without a viable means of determining threat level, logic dictates we are better off treating all tîr beings as hostile invaders. The risk of communication outweighs the returns to a devastating degree, so put that false hope from your mind. We can rely only upon what is gleaned from dissecting immobile corpses. Though even that is not without its risks.”

That was the end of their conversation. Vanessa had been sprawled on the ground, listening with one ear, but she abruptly leaped to her feet, stalking toward Katie.

“Aalto, you get the logic, but your heart won’t fall in line, right? No matter how nicely this old fart runs you through it, you ain’t *lived* it. You gotta run up against the real deal and *then* make up your mind. I can’t argue with that! A mage with no ego ain’t worth diddly-squat.”

Vanessa cackled wildly. She was Demitrio’s polar opposite, Oliver thought. She *acted* like she respected her students’ positions, but she knew how fragile they were and had nothing but contempt for them. It was like going up to a candle in the wind and saying, *Burn all you want, bitch*. Katie was hardly the girl she’d been her first year, but none of her growth mattered to Vanessa.

As Katie just glared back at her, Vanessa’s gaze shifted upward. A moment later, every student felt something descending toward them, the sheer wrongness of it slamming against their skin. Every athame leaped to hand, pointed skyward. Vanessa moved back to the front of the formation, her grin twisting diabolically.

“Welp, time to get your answers. Don’t worry, Aalto; logic ain’t got shit to do with it. There are some truths even the dumbest mind’ll get on sight. And this shit show is one of ’em.”

Her arms and legs swelled from within, bulging. A point of blackness appeared in the blue above, spinning furiously. Soon it was a hundred yards across, and the moment she spied the white tips of the conical *things* emerging from that inky blackness, Vanessa roared, “Three columns! Smashing from the fore!”

“I’ll back you. Go, Vanessa.”

The plan established, the ground beneath Vanessa burst, her body shooting forward faster than the students’ eyes could follow. The three long, thick *things* descending from the portal hit the ground, evenly spaced. Massive columns, the flat white surface broken only by several “eyes” that looked like red glass windows. Easily twenty yards wide, they were at least five times that tall. Nothing biological here, the inorganic rigidity downright imposing.

“What...are those...?” Guy gulped.

“Tamper pillars,” Chela said. “Uranischegar’s vanguard. Hard to classify them as living, but the nature of them is quite simple.”

Even as she expounded, the invaders demonstrated their nature. The area around the pillars was repeatedly hit by powerful shocks, flattening the ground around them like pressing sheet metal. Some sheep that had been grazing nearby and smaller creatures fleeing the anomaly were caught up in it, painting the ground red.

Once the terrain was “dead,” a horrible shade of white began oozing out of the pillars, corrupting everything nearby. Like paint splattered on a canvas, it coated the landscape. The green of the grass and the red of the blood, the brown of the earth from which both lives sprang—all was swallowed by the white in kind.

“Stab, loom, flatten. That is how they always begin,” Chela added. “Process the ground around them until it is all the exact same height. No consideration to what was there. Trees, grass, creatures, mountains, river, valleys, houses, towns, cities...or people. They drag everything in, swallow them up, and convert them to this flat white expanse. Leaving no trace behind, as if it was *always* like this.”

Before that enterprise, Guy could only shiver. He’d believed himself prepared. No matter what monsters emerged from the portal, he’d thought his nerves could handle it. But *not this*. The nature of the horror was too far removed from what he had anticipated. He’d come to face down monsters from an alien world—but all he got was hammers, pounding away at the ground. There was nothing here to face. No hostility, no enmity, merely pure white violence, a demonstration of overwhelming force.

“...Uranischegar is a world of geometric perfection,” Oliver said. “Organic or inorganic, not one thing is ever allowed to escape that regularity. Thus, anything belonging to it makes no attempt to adapt to the nature of our world. Wherever they are, they simply remake things to their own liking. Simple and brutal, an invasion devoid of compromise.”

Nanao was simply watching the pillars work, her expression grim.

“...They aren’t even alive,” Pete said, his voice shaking. “They’re like construction machines...”

“Yes, that impression is not wrong,” Chela told him. “They are the instruments of a god, made for but one purpose. And their behavior is a demonstration of that tír’s divine will. Expand the world. Allow no other way. Turn all things orderly and uniform. That’s the nature of the god that presides over Uranischegar—the Regimented Heavens.”

That was the sum of it. From a categorical standpoint, the pillars before them were within the range of a migration. Reflexively moving to a passing world, no longer-term plan or further invasion behind. Like taking a breath. Uranischegar reacted in exactly the same way to

any and all worlds it encountered. No clever schemes or strategies—its invasions performed on instinct alone.

“___?!”

Faced with a spectacle like this, no one was tempted to act. But someone here saw fit to change that. A chunk of pillar pulverized by Vanessa’s massive fists came flying through the barrier meant to keep the students safe. A second and third followed, slamming into the ground beside them. She’d thrown them here herself. A sight that earned a bellow from Demitrio.

“Vanessa! What is the meaning of this?!”

“Can it, Gramps. I’m delivering you some teachin’ tools. You’re bored just watching, right? Go on, tackle them chunks. That ain’t small enough to stop ’em, but they’re a solid first sparring partner.”

She let out a delighted cackle. The students had assumed they were safe and protected, and she was clearly feasting malevolently on their disturbed looks. The older students knew her far too well, and they never hesitated. Furious, Tim plunged right into the middle of them.

“That fucking hag... We’ve got kids here, dammit! Everyone back off—stay behind me!”

“Force them out, Leoncio!”

“I know! **Extruditor!**”

Godfrey and Leoncio were working together in perfect harmony. Like the league prelim, there were no factions or rivalries here. Their spells sent a pillar chunk flying back out of the barrier, and Vanessa clapped her hands, grinning.

“You pass! Picking spells their rules can’t handle, I see. Go on, show your juniors the way.”

She seemed to find their struggles hilarious. Vanessa was crossing a line even Kimberly teachers usually toed, and Demitrio looked ready to shoot her. His voice was icy cold.

“...The headmistress will hear of this.”

“Knock yourself out. But first maybe stop your precious student getting smeared across the ground?”

She pointed her deformed hand behind him. Demitrio spun around and saw her words on the verge of coming true. Even a sliver of these columns still reflected the divine will, yet where others backed away, one girl was stumbling toward it.

“...Hahhh...hahhh...hahhh...”

It was Katie. The third-years scattered like baby spiders, but her rudder was turned against the tide. Well aware this was a walk to her destruction, yet her soul demanded it, and so her body moved. In the chaos, Oliver spotted her too late.

His eyes went wide, and he shrieked, “Katie?! Wait, don’t—!”

She *did* hear him. And she felt it tug her backward. Nevertheless—her advance did not falter. Her eyes were fixed on the child-size fragment, already recovering its pillared form. Her first encounter with a visitor from a *tír*. Faced with a nature beyond the capacity of her perception, she couldn't stop herself from trying to understand. She could not discard a thing without first making an attempt.

No matter how much love she had for her friends, on this one thing she could not bend. It was this girl's very essence. The fate Katie Aalto's soul bore from the moment this mage was born.

A small fragment of the whole. The power it wielded correspondingly minuscule. Yet, its behavior remained unchanged. The pressure of the pillar fragment's pounding leveled the ground in a circle. Katie gritted her teeth against the force of it, pressing on.

"...Unh... Gah...!"

She briefly opened her eyes amid the turbulence to see that exact fragment within reach. This visitor she so yearned to reveal, right before her very eyes. And then—there, on that bleached ground, ever so slowly—she touched it.

".....!"

Through overlapped personal space, the unknown surged into her. A different order, an alien cognition, an unearthly worldview all wrapped up and pressed against her, and Katie's mind attempted a translation, but in the first second, her head nearly detonated. Yet, she held firm. Not letting the vast wash of information drown her. She did not need to comprehend it *now*. But merely letting it in did not qualify as an exchange. The interspecies communication she'd learned was a discipline of magical biology. The methodology her tenacious research had isolated here urged her to a question bordering on insanity.

Why?

Right to the crux of the matter. A god this simplistic needed no detours. Her question's theme the thing she imagined it most receptive to. Imposing geometric order on all outside worlds—an act all new witnesses instinctively believed beyond comprehension. Thus, she asked. Assuming that the perpetrator *wished* to be understood.



Why do you want this?

She asked again, repeating it, indicating a desire for knowledge. The act was a goal and yet a means. Demonstrating that this was a conversation, not a fight. Letting it *feel* that. An approach Katie plucked from the mountains of rubble other mages had left behind, heedless of the injuries it inflicted upon herself.

Something shifted behind those inorganic walls. Katie's instincts told her it was *there*. Something that resonated deep within herself. Something a mere landscaping machine could never have. Writhing in isolation, far removed from mankind, yet with a heat to it that was unmistakably *passion*.

.....!

For a moment, she got through.

Katie heard it, echoing across the boundaries—a *scream* not of this world.

“Dipshit!”

Tim was there, his arms around her. The same thing hit him, nearly swallowing him. He fought it off, bodily rejecting it, his life dependent on success.

“Tim!”

“Mr. Linton!”

“...Kah... Ah...!”

Godfrey and Oliver both lunged in, athames aimed—but far too late. It would be less than two seconds before their help reached him, and Tim saw no way to hold out that long. He at least wanted to push the girl to safety, but his limbs had lost all sensation, and he couldn't even manage that. Long had it been since he felt death's embrace, its icy hand upon his heart.

Shit. The word rasped voicelessly within his throat.

“■■■■” *Split!*

The deadly fingers reaching for him were cut off by a man's distinctive chant. Tim and Katie collapsed to the ground, freed from contact with all things alien. Oliver and Godfrey found Demitrio standing in the path of their charge.

“To the back of the barrier,” he ordered, his voice tinged with regret. “My oversight. I swear I shall not let them any closer.”

Oliver and Godfrey each grabbed a friend and ran off with them in their arms. Demitrio's eyes were trained in the opposite direction—not just at the fragment resiliently encroaching upon the area around it but on the three source columns beyond.

“Begone, invaders. No matter how many times you come, you shall not get your fingers in our world. **Fortis Flamma Maxime!**”

And flames coated the earth, vaporizing the fragment before them

and melting the bases of the three pillars beyond. As they began to topple, Vanessa leaped away, swearing—her shoulder roasted by the same inferno. But her invectives were not worth hearing.

In the fight that ensued, the man uttered not one word beyond the spells he cast.

The battle ended before the sun reached its zenith. The black swirling portal above closed, vanishing—leaving the students standing before the scorched earth. Certain the threat was gone, one after another sank to their knees on the ash-covered soil. Few had directly taken part, and they had not been here all *that* long—but each of the students found themselves trapped in the embrace of a preternatural exhaustion.

“All done? Not too shabby a workout!” Vanessa said, the sole exception to the above.

Her limbs returned to normal, and she stretched. Her eyes pierced the crowd of students to where Katie lay unconscious, her friends desperately calling her name.

“Katie...!”

“C’mon, wake up! This ain’t funny!”

“Her heart’s beating, and she’s still breathing! Someone check for etheric damage—!”

The Sword Roses were fighting to save her, their words delivered in shrieks. Demitrio had been on the front lines and was headed their way, but Vanessa pushed through the pack first. Ignoring their horrified looks, she grabbed the downed girl by her collar.

“No way you kicked the bucket. Wake the fuck up. Only a moron falls asleep in a war zone.”

As she spoke, she slapped Katie’s cheek hard. One act of violence after another. Apoplectic, her friends reached for their athames but did not draw. Before they could, the girl’s eyes fluttered open.

“...I’m...okay. I’m still here...”

“Ah—!”

“You’re sure about that? You know who we are?!”

Oliver fought back a sob, and Pete leaned in, asking questions. Vanessa dropped the girl on the ground, and Nanao slid in to catch her. Demitrio approached, wand aimed Katie’s way, examining her.

“...No etheric damage, no signs of parasites. Luck was with you, Ms. Aalto.”

“...Thanks...,” she whispered, her gratitude tinged with sarcasm.

Forgetting themselves in their relief, Oliver and Guy threw their arms around her from each side, and Chela embraced all three. Responding to their hugs with what strength she had left, Katie looked

around.

“...I’m sorry, Mr. Linton.”

“Apology *not* accepted. You feel better, come by the Watch HQ, and I’ll give you a slap of my own.”

Leaning on Lesedi’s shoulder, Tim shot Katie a thumbs-down. This got a rueful smile out of her. If that was all it took to even the score, he was much nicer than she thought. The stunt she’d pulled could well have earned her the beating of her life.

“Anyone else hurt?” Demitrio asked. “Then let’s head back to school. Seventh-years first. The two wounded ride with someone at the center of the pack. Vanessa and I will bring up the rear.”

“On it,” Godfrey said and started barking orders: reforming the ranks, getting the older students into the sky. Classified as wounded, Tim was waiting with Lesedi for his turn—but he glanced at Oliver.

“...Yo, Horn. C’mere.”

“Yeah?”

Oliver left Katie in the embrace of their friends and ran over to his beckoning senior. Tim settled down on the ground next to Lesedi, screwing up his face.

“...Don’t take your eyes off Aalto anytime soon,” he hissed.

“.....! You mean...watch for signs? Instructor Aristides’s diagnosis isn’t final?”

“Nah, she’s likely fine in the physical sense. The problem is *her*. When I jumped in, I could tell. Your whole crew’s a bunch of walking red flags, but that dipshit’s the worst of ya.”

There was a real urgency in his voice that unsettled Oliver. And Tim rattled off his reasoning.

“To avoid getting swallowed by that damn column, I had to close myself off and *resist*. Nothing else you can do in those circumstances. But that nutcase did the opposite. Pretty sure she was opening herself up and trying to *talk* to those things.”

“_____!”

“My personal space was overlapped with ’em both, so I could tell. Dunno anything else. Knowing wouldn’t make me understand. But I can say one thing for sure—don’t you dare take your eyes off her. Right then, she smelled exactly like they all do before they get consumed by the spell.”

At that last dire warning, Oliver shuddered—and Tim waved him back to his friends. The boy quickly hid his fear and turned away. Regardless of the veracity of that claim, Katie was clearly in poor shape. It would never do for him to unnerve her or their friends any further. Telling himself that, he hopped on his broom and hovered over to her.

“...Katie, it’s almost our turn. You’re riding with me. Can you hang

on till we reach campus? I'll tie you down just in case."

"...Mm, I'm fine. Thanks, Oliver."

Oliver was best at riding tandem, so he was the natural choice to carry her. Katie's body felt heavy, but she forced it into motion. Chela and Guy both helped her onto Oliver's broom. Not long after, their launch time came, and they took off, the other four friends clustered around them. Keeping his flight speed low to minimize the burden on her, Oliver addressed the warmth on his back.

"...Why would you do that? I haven't seen anyone act that reckless since Nanao in her first year."

"Sorry... I know exactly how dumb it was..."

Guilt tore its way through her, and she wanted to cry. It hurt Katie to make others worry. It hurt when her choices rattled and scared them. Worst of all: She couldn't find it in herself to regret the actions that had caused all that.

"But...for a moment there..."

The words spilled out despite herself. She'd *achieved* something—and that undeniable certainty brought her joy that could not be contained. She knew that was a feeling she should not have. That expressing it trampled on her friends' concern, a complete betrayal of their feelings for her. A drive that looked human yet was anything but—and she knew this was a *mage's* affliction.

So at the least, she should not hide it.

"...I heard God's voice."

A raspy confession that made a shiver run down Oliver's spine.

He longed to spin around and demand further explanation, considered abandoning the formation and landing that very instant. But even as he fought off that impulse, he knew the opposite was true—he could *not afford* to look back now.

".....!"

He didn't see what look her face wore as she'd spoken those words. But if she was *smiling*? Oliver couldn't guarantee he'd ever be the same around Katie Aalto again.

END

Afterword

Good evening. I am Bokuto Uno. The heat of the junior league has drawn to a close.

Each forged themselves and put the results to the test. The outcomes gave them successes and targets and will lead these young souls to further heights. The true value of victory once grasped, the meaning of the defeat consuming—that is for them to decide.

Only the senior league finale remains. With the school election hanging in the balance, what will each faction's leaders bring? Whatever the conclusion, it will be an oracle for the future of Kimberly itself.

And yet, events are in motion elsewhere, too. The detective bucks his master's intentions, but what lays at the end of the path he has chosen? The girl has recognized anew her lot in life, and where will her feet take her, to what success—or to what end?

Meanwhile, the astronomy instructor draws closer to the truth, armed with the intel taken from his splintered soul. It won't be long before suspicion becomes conviction. And if they cannot shake him off, then the boy and his allies have only one option remaining.

Battles above and below the surface approach their conclusions. May your heart be ready for them.

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